



THE RIFT BETWEEN FEMALE EXPECTATIONS AND MALE IDEALS IN HENRIK IBSEN'S *WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN*

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Abstract: In Henrik Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*, Arnold Rubek exploits two females, Maja and Irene, for accomplishing fame and fortune. He strives to achieve his masculine ideals at the cost of their feminine expectations. He chooses Irene as his muse who performs her given role being aware that she must accept her servicing identity in a patriarchal society. She forces her to imitate the woman of his artistic mission. The other female, Maja wants to become his ideal wife, performing everything to fulfill his wishes. Realizing that her husband wants to discard their marital bond she leaves him, and finds another male for her. In this play gender inequality and mechanism of power lie at the core of the male-female relation. The unequal male-female relation gives birth to a perpetual rift in the society. This paper intends to present the rift between female expectations and male ideals in Henrik Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*. It also seeks to explore how female expectations are shaped, modified, and even transformed by male ideals, and how females accept their instrumentality under the constant surveillance of male standards. It will apply Michel Foucault's theorization of Jeremy Bentham's idea of panopticon to explain the disciplinary mechanism of patriarchal society which practices power on females, and strategically make them account for the torment and oppression they undergo in the hegemonized society.

Keywords: Henrik Ibsen, *When we Dead Awaken*, female expectations, panopticon, surveillance

Introduction

In Henrik Ibsen's plays male and female perceptions of the world move in different directions; male aspires to achieve secured positions, braving situations and societal threats while female expectations lie dead beneath male ideals. Within the framework of his dramas, Ibsen exposes a typical patriarchal society criticizing its notions that keep females away from discovering themselves. In his creative world, his characters like Nora, Mrs Alving, Martha, and Lona suffer as they are exposed to masculine egotism. They are subjected to fathers, husbands, brothers, or even elder sons. Ibsen's dramatic epilogue *When We Dead Awaken* recapitulates the pattern of male and female desires. Having an overriding aim to achieve the greatness of an ideal artist, Rubek objectifies Irene for his art, and then, purchases Maja as his wife. When Maja fails to satisfy his artistic soul, he immediately re-substitutes the vivacious Maja by Irene. Both of them accept their servicing roles with an expectation that the artist would turn into the man they want him to be. But their expectations are crushed by Rubek's cold artistic ideals. In the rift, the male power wins while the female ends loser.

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Patriarchal society and its domination

Panopticon is a functional structure that ensures effective as well as intensive operation of power and hegemony in society. Society as it happens with panopticon exercises complete surveillance on an individual in such a way that he/she does not know when he/she is to be seen. Thus, he/she is affected psychologically by “unverifiable power” (Foucault, 1995). However, the real subjection of individuals to this mechanism of panopticon does not happen as a kind of force or prohibition; rather the major effect of panopticon induces “in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1995). The position of females in the society replicates the predicament of individuals subjected to the mechanism of panopticon.

Traditionally females are considered physically and intellectually weaker than their male counterparts. The overwhelming patriarchal society provides all powers and privileges to males, and in all possible ways subordinates females to the male authority. It is a metaphorical panopticon which exercises surveillance on females, and females are very well aware of that surveillance. The mechanism of society subjugates females so as to let them believe in masculine superiority. By suppressing their ambitions the society imprisons them in a male-dominated world where they are compelled to worship males as their idols and gods.

The relation between Rubek and Irene demonstrates the prototype of patriarchal society, and its domination on females. It delineates “a savage caricature of the gendered aesthetic of man/ inventor, women/ invented, man/ maker, women/ muse” (Templeton, 1997). Sculptor Rubek chooses Irene to attain his artistic mission. The most talented sculptor Rubek’s longing to accomplish material success represents the “self seeking world of man” (Lowenthal, 1965). He cherishes the dream of a statue of “[t]he Resurrection Day” in the form of a woman, “the noblest, the purest, the ideal” (Ibsen, 1965). Irene, of her own accord, devotes herself as a friend, comrade, and co-worker to execute his artistic ideal:

IRENE. I raised three fingers in the air and swore I'd go with you to the world's end and the end of life. And that I'd serve you in all things—

RUBEK. As the model for my art—

IRENE. In full nakedness—

RUBEK (*moved*). And you did serve me, Irene—with such buoyancy, and joy, and darling.

IRENE. Yes, with all the throbbing blood of my youth, I served you! (Ibsen, 1965)

From time immemorial, women’s naked body has played a significant role in art. Women’s nakedness has traditionally represented innocence and beauty. Rubek wants to create the statue of an ideal woman which will stand for the redemptive power that her virginity signals. Irene serves him with “full nakedness” (Ibsen, 1965). Her nakedness presents the ideal innocence of a young woman. She swears to do whatever Rubek needs to carve that sculpture. Her line confirms the completeness of her devotion. This dedication is a crucial part of her existence, while for Rubek, she is only a model, a mere means of his creation.

Irene's nakedness in art conveys her dangerous and "marginal" position as a "scarlet woman" (Mirahmadi and Jamili, 2014). Day after day Rubek watches her not as a man, but as an artist "infuriatingly self-controlled" (Ibsen, 1965). He uses her without considering what "may his misuse bring with itself" (Hooti and Jaihouni, 2012). Afterwards, she consciously exposes herself before crowds in several theatres. In order to survive, to earn money she needs to satisfy male's voyeuristic desires. Her role as a "naked statue in a living tableau" (Ibsen, 1965) is a vulgar version of her naked exposure for the artist. Through this role she falls into the category of an erotic one-an object of the controlling male gaze.

Rubek, an agent of patriarchy, subordinates and theorizes Irene for his art. He thinks that he is complimenting her by giving her such a great position in his Pygmalion-like statue. Rubek considers Irene as "the living image of Resurrection" (Ibsen, 1965). He is like a "scorpion, emptied his poison into the soft flesh" (Williams, 1952) and is not capable of any kind of lively relationship. Irene is "both an object and subject of knowledge" (Foucault, 1995) for him. First and foremost Rubek is an artist and the art is his "mission" (Ibsen, 1965). Irene to him is nothing more than "a sacred creature, to be touched only by worshipful thoughts" (Ibsen, 1965). While Irene waits to be loved, he indifferently keeps him away. Joan Templeton (1997) calls him a "Kierkegaardian idealist" and a "Freudian sublimator" (Templeton, 1997) because of his theorization that an erotic relation with a woman would distract and weaken him. What Rubek believes to be a joyful display of body is, in fact, a painful, humiliating work for Irene. His art works "as a tool that serves to misidentify the artist from the model and to force the model to immobility and silence, while the artist obtains an emotionless state" (Shaw, 1913). Leo Lowenthal (1965) claims that the relation of Rubek and Irene can be equal "to that of neurotic and psychoanalytic" (Lowenthal, 1965) as he can express or do whatever comes to his mind while for her everything is restricted, structured – no scope to unlock her mind.

Moved by a dominant passion, Rubek attempts to earn name by crafting the statue of a perfect woman. After completing the statue, he dismisses her, saying, "[t]hank you from the bottom of my heart . . . this . . . has been an extraordinary episode for me" (Ibsen, 1965). Terribly shocked, Irene leaves him, and it so happens that he loses his creative power. The masterpiece appears to him naive and false. He also finds that, it is Irene who dominates the statue. The statue is the product of his innovation. It should reflect his image. So he carves his own image who tries to dip "his fingers in the flowing water – to rinse them clean" (Ibsen, 1965). He rearranges the masterpiece to make his figure more prominent than that of the woman. The statue now represents a man who fails to exceed "the earth's crust" (Ibsen, 1965). After foregrounding the woman's figure, he carves inferior things. His "conception of the Resurrection Day" becomes "something more larger and more – more complex" (Ibsen, 1965). Rubek, in all possible ways, tries to ensure his dominance. The finished statue no longer represents Irene's young innocent figure, instead, it demonstrates his new outlook:

RUBEK. I enlarged the composition with things I saw through my own eyes in the world around me. I had to. Nothing else would do, Irene. I extended the pedestal—to make it wide and spacious. And

out of the cracks in the earth human beings swarm up now, with disguised animal faces. Women and men—exactly as I knew them from life. (Ibsen, 1965)

Irene and her self-surveillance

Society determines what is to be feminine. It wants women's perpetual service. It exercises power on a female so tactically that the female herself plays a significant role in the process of her oppression. Her cooperation contributes to keep patrimony intact. Ironically, she is "not a forced slave but a willing one" (Mill, 1993).

Rubek has defined Irene's identity, and Irene carries out her given identity throughout her life, even, in his absence. She is an "inspiring episode" (Ibsen, 1965) for him. Her sexual urges are denied for his art: "a piece of art becomes a substitute for carnal desire" (Maziulienė, 2007). Her service transforms her into a metaphorical statue. Rubek objectifies Irene to sculpt an ideal beauty. In Rubek's absence she also objectifies herself. She kills all her lovers and husbands who want to love her as real men. She even kills her still-born babies since she believes herself to be only a metaphorical mother of the statue which she calls her "child" (Ibsen, 1965). She feels that she is to produce a metaphorical offspring only, not a real one. She, in fact, repeats death, re-acts death, and performs death. She does not feel any kind of remorse as she has given her soul away to Rubek. Even though she does not want to speak of the past, she remains in the past. She forever nourishes Rubek's aesthetic ideal.

Power relations and the question of resistance

Irene is a ceaseless performer of Rubek's fantasy and carries out the ideals he has taught her. In *A Doll's House*, with her departure Nora violently resists a patriarchal society, refusing to discharge her duties as wife and mother. She radically demands equal rights, swooping on the tyrannical authority of Helmer. She realizes that the miracle she expects will never happen. She revolts against the demands of patriarchy through her dance of death as if she was bitten by the legendary spider, tarantula. Her dance is a double manifestation of who she really is. It serves as a form of a hysterical catharsis for her, permitting her to emancipate from her societal as well as her marital bond. By slamming the door she resists the male authority. Irene does not fit into this equation. Her identity is associated with Rubek's ideal. She feels that Rubek has not achieved his desires yet. She invites him to "go instead high up into the mountain. As high as you can go. Higher, higher – always higher, Arnold" (Ibsen, 1965). She persists on going up to the peaks of mountain so that they can share with each other "the paths to the heights" (Ibsen, 1965). She is pursuing a desire set in motion by Rubek.

Rubek accepts her invitation. Seemingly he selflessly forsakes his rich fortune and his conjugal life with Maja only to respond to the urge of Irene. However, the hidden agenda behind his acceptance of Irene's invitation is that, he needs her because she has the key with which she can "open up everything that's locked away" (Ibsen, 1965) in him. Only she can rekindle his spirit. He tells Maja:

RUBEK (*tapping his chest*). In here, you see—here I carry a little, tiny casket with a cunning lock that can never be forced. And in that casket all my visions lie stored away. But when she went off without a trace,

the lock on the casket clicked shut. And she had the key—and she took it with her. You, my dear little Maja—you had no key. So everything inside there lies unused. And the years pass! And I can't get at the treasure. (Ibsen, 1965)

Rubek needs Irene to unlock his creative casket. Maja does not possess the key. He searches for Irene for his own achievement, and does not hesitate to abuse Irene's life once again.

Throughout her life, Irene is subordinated to Rubek. She endeavours to please him in all possible ways. She evokes the game that they used to play during their happy moments in the Lake Taunitz to calm down Rubek's agitated soul. Together they pretend to play a game of make-believe swans and boats. This game is drawn from the myth of Lohengrin of the Parsifal legends. Like Lohengrin, Rubek rejects Irene for a higher mission, and after many years she comes back to him to restore his creativity. Their game also connotes to their roles they played in the past. Irene knows that this game of mimicry is favourite to Rubek, and employs it as a self-conscious effort to fill the void existing between them. Meeting Rubek after many years, she starts playing the same game. The game suggests that she will again revive herself as "an episode" (Ibsen, 1965) for him. Her secondary status remains unchanged.

Irene, of course, accuses Rubek time and again for the wrong he has done to her. Irene's soul does not matter to him. He even changes the sculpture according to his new motif and thoughts. She accuses him of changing his conception of the statue, "their child" (Ibsen, 1965) and creating his own world, neglecting her own sufferings. At the same time, she also underscores her own responsibility in her instrumentality. She has denied her own self to please Rubek. Her self-denial has marginalized her and made her a subaltern. She argues,

IRENE (*her eyes full of cunning*). Because, my friend, there's something extenuating in that world. Something self-justifying—that throws a cloak over every sin and human frailty. (*Her tone changing suddenly*.) But I was a human destiny to fulfill. See, I let that go—gave it all up to make myself your instrument—Oh, that was a suicide. A mortal sin against myself. (*Half whispers*.) And that sin I can never atone for. (Ibsen, 1965)

Irene realizes that she should have fulfilled her own desires. She has done "a moral sin" against her individuality by serving him. Her appreciation of the futility of her service is "a direction to the perception of her mere instrumentality" (Templeton, 1997). However, her realization is ephemeral. Her resistance is too weak to overthrow Rubek's ideal. Her resistance can be termed as a "localized episode" (Foucault, 1995) which does not have any significant place in the entire network of power relations. His reactions to her attack on him exemplifies that she is still a prop, she can never be a Nora or a Hedda. He knows that he can again manipulate her. He seeks a chance from her, "then let our two dead souls live life to the full for once—before we go down in our grave again!" (Ibsen, 1965). Irene trusts him completely. She responds to Rubek's plea:

RUBEK. Up there we'll celebrate our marriage feast, Irene – my beloved!

IRENE (*proudly*). The sun will look kindly on us, Arnold.

RUBEK. All the powers of light will look kindly on us. And those of darkness, too. (Seizing her hand). Will you go with me, my sacred – my sanctified bride?

IRENE (as though transfigured). Freely and joyfully, my lord and master. (Ibsen, 1965)

Irene accompanies her “lord and master” to serve his order. Hand in hand, Rubek and Irene climb up to the mountain top wearing a cloak with a “swan’s downhood” (Ibsen, 1965). Like the virgin bride of Lohengrin legend, she again inspires him to achieve his unattained aim. Rubek guides her “up to the topmost peak of the tower that gleams in the sunrise” (Ibsen, 1965). Irene is Rubek’s “sanctified bride” and Rubek is her “lord and master”. Turid S. Myrholt (2007) understands it, the cause for her inability to lead a life of her own is “the pressure of convention...*still exercised* on women—and through women” (Myrholt, 2007).

Maja and her predicament in conjugal life

There is a chasm in the relationship between Rubek and Maja. Maja is living in a world where men take advantage of women, and in some way, gain control over them. Rubek locks himself within his own world of weariness and never treats her fairly. He marries her when he feels lonely and disheartened. By marrying her, he traps her into a domesticity where, “he took her, but not up! No, he duped her into a cold, dank cage, where there was neither sun nor fresh air—as it seemed to her, anyway – but only gilded walls, with great stone phantoms spaced around them” (Ibsen, 1965).

Rubek is silent and indifferent to Maja’s anguish. From the beginning of *When We Dead Awaken*, there is alienation between the couple. Maja’s exclamation regarding the “overpowering” (Ibsen, 1965) silence is, indeed, a projection of her predicament. Her relation with him is as “mute and meaningless” (Mcfarlane, 1994) as the audible silence. She feels the silence within herself as she fails to tune herself to the noise of the outside world. She asserts, “I mean, everywhere here in this city there was plenty of noise and activity. But nevertheless – I felt that even that noise and activity had something dead about it” (Ibsen, 1965). Rubek’s coldness towards her feelings transforms her as a member of the silent world—this silence is deadly. Like Irene, she is another episode for him. She is utterly powerless in her own house.

Generally, home is a place which creates a strong bondage among its members. It provides privacy, security, and a sense of belonging. Rubek has built up a new home in the city for him and his young wife but their home is just a dwelling place. It does not offer Maja the feelings of a home. It fails to establish a close and secured relationship. She and her husband live in their home quite silently, not conversing spontaneously. She prefers to term her home only a house referring to the alienation and the distance prevailing between them:

MAJA (*eagerly, drawing her chair closer*). There, you see, Rubek! We'd be better off travelling again. Just as soon as we can.

RUBEK (*somewhat impatiently*). Well, that is the decision, Maja dear. You know that.

MAJA. But why not right now, today? We could have it so nice and cozy down there in our lovely new house—

RUBEK (*with an indulgent smile*). Or, to put it more exactly: our lovely new home.

MAJA (*brusquely*). I prefer house. Let's stay with that. (Ibsen, 1965)

Rubek wants to establish the cold house as home which Maja refuses to accept. He can ensure luxury, but cannot provide a successful, happy, and loving family. To Maja, it is more a house than a home. Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman (2015) illustrates the dichotomy of home and house in connection with his reading of Nora-Helmer relationship:

The rather casual note of the couple's discussion brings into light the differences between home and house. The latter is a physical entity which offers shelter and protection to people; the former is a concept based on the proverbial expression that home is where heart is. A cage is also a house in that it houses pets/beings; but it is not a home. Ibsen's title of *Etdukkehjem (A Doll's House)* pinpoints that the dolls cannot have a *hjem*; that a home remains a mirage as long as a *dukkerelasjon* (Helland, 2006, 136), a puppet relationship exists in a family. (Ahsanuzzaman, 2015)

It is Rubek who decided to accept Maja as his wife when he wanted to substitute life for art. He now wants to reunite with Irene because she is the source of his artistic inspiration. Maja accepts her husband's decision. She is hurt; however, she never reveals how much shocked she is. She insists that he can do what he pleases. She realizes that Rubek has taken her, "as a sort of consolation prize" (Ibsen, 1965). She is aware of the gulf between Rubek and her,

MAJA. Yes, if you want to be free of me, then say it straight out—and I'll leave on the spot.

RUBEK (*with a barely perceptible smile*). Do you mean that as a threat, Maja?

MAJA. I can't imagine that's any threat for you.

RUBEK (*rising*). No, I expect you're right. (*After a pause.*) You and I can't possibly go on living like this together. (Ibsen, 1965)

While her husband wants to take Irene as a substitute for her, Maja does not show any kind of reaction. She knows that in a patriarchal society she is not allowed to revolt. She suggests, "[t]hen the two of us would simply get out of each other's way. Split up. I can always find something new for myself somewhere in the world" (Ibsen, 1965). Internalizing patriarchal norms, she develops her mind based on domination and subjugation.

Maja is aware of each and every game she plays. She has agreed to marry Rubek not for his high ideals, she has accepted him so that she can be socially and financially secured. Just like her acceptance of playing the game of Rubek's wife, she accepts to join the game of the bear hunter. Both men are ugly.

MAJA (*heartedly, without moving*) . But he's so ugly! (*Tears a tuft of heather out and throws it aside.*) So ugly! Ugly! Isch!

RUBEK. Is that why you're so eager to push off with him – into the primeval forests?

MAJA (*brusquely*). I don't know. (*Turning toward him.*) You are ugly also, Rubek. (Ibsen, 1965)

Rubek is ugly in his own way. He has mistreated her. He discards her when he finds Irene. She becomes aware of the predicament of her conjugal life. Her tears are the outcome of her anguish. Before leaving she tells Rubek, "I'll get you a bird of prey, to model. On a wing shot, all for you" (Ibsen, 1965). Maja is a mere pet to Rubek. She is imprisoned in her conjugal life and has to leave him when he wants. She helplessly accepts all her husband's wishes.

Conclusion

To conclude, both Irene and Maja are bound to make their marginal moves in a paternalistic world for the fulfillment of Rubek's cold artistic intent. By isolating their expectations, they perform their passive roles and so, fail to attain any literal or figurative space for their own. Ironically, they themselves become responsible for their subservient status contributing to their own subjection. Although Irene realizes her sheer instrumentality, she again let herself be manipulated by the man who has objectified her and accompanies him to the mountain top to accomplish his sublime ideal. Maja also wants to do everything to please Rubek. When Rubek approaches Irene, Maja accepts another man, Ulfheim, for protection as well as freedom. However, the fact remains that, Ulfheim may not allow her liberty because she too is a puppet in the male dominated world. Indeed, both the women in *When We Dead Awaken* are ready to perform their prescribed roles because of societal practice achieved through epistemological violence on them. In the rift between their expectations and Rubek's ideal, they end the losers.

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