

Ghosts: A Play of Emotional Starvation

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The play *Ghosts* (1881) was written by Henrik Ibsen. The play deals with the serious sociological issues of love, marriage, family and incest. The play raises the question pertaining to the moral issues and the of rights and duties of men and women in the society. Excessive freedom to men leads to moral anarchy in the married life. The life of the Alvings has been depicted with full honesty by the playwright. The play has been divided into three Acts.

The Acts one presents the life of Mrs. Alving, the widow of Captain Alving, her maid servant Regina and Oswald Alving. Mrs. Alving was visited by her son Oswald after the gap of two years. Oswald was a notable artist. He came to his home after brief period. He had visited big cities of Europe. He had the experience of living in Rome and Paris. He loved his mother Mrs. Alving. She had built an orphanage in the memory of her departed husband Captain Alving. Manders, the parson was expected to visit Mrs. Alving to discuss about the legal issues pertaining to orphanage. The play opens with the unscheduled visit of Engstrand. Regina the daughter of Engstrand was giving water to the plants. Engstrand wanted that his daughter should leave the house of Alvings. He wanted that Regina should help him in running Sailors Home which he had planned to open in the town. Engstrand and Regina made conversation with each other on this matter. She informed him about the arrival of young master Oswald. Regina warned him to leave the place immediately. After his departure, Manders arrived. Regina informed Mrs. Alving about the arrival of Manders. They had a long conversation. They talked on various issues including the inauguration of orphanage. They made had their conversation on domestic issues. Manders disliked the collection of books of Mrs. Alving. He had the opinion that because of reading of these books she had been turned into astray. Mrs. Alving heard everything patiently. Manders alleged her that she had failed as a mother. He also called her failed wife. The overdose of humiliation made Mrs. Alvings to give reply to Manders. She told Manders that he had never visited to Alvings house after a long period. He had come after a long interval.

Mrs. Alving is the embodiment of struggle against all the domestic forces but without any fruitful success. She was a widow of Captain Alving. He did not leave anything for his wife to take pride on him. She became the mother of Oswald, the only son, by Captain Alving. Unfortunately, the son inherited the deadly disease syphilis from his father. She was the real sufferer of the play. She did not enjoy conjugal blessing of married life. Mrs. Alving's maiden name was Helen. After marriage she became Mrs. Alving. She was a dutiful and devoted wife. She raised her son in strict discipline as a true mother. She tried to fill the vacuum of the absence of father from her son's life. She successfully played the role of father and mother in shaping the future of her son's life. When Manders came to the Alvings House, she disclosed her psychological anguish which she faced in her life. Manders was a parson and a family friend of the Alvings. Though he was close to the family but unaware of the grim reality of the troubled relation between husband and wife. He had visited Mrs. Alving to apprise the details of orphanage which was built in the memory of her late husband Captain Alving. Manders had to perform several works before the inaugural of orphanage. The orphanage was expected to be inaugurated, the next day, as everything was almost

complete. When Manders visited Mrs. Alving's place he came to know that Oswald had been also present at home. He took food at Mrs. Alving's home. He had a detailed talk on domestic issues and other legal matters with Mrs. Alvings. Manders, the pastor, blamed Mrs. Alving because she failed to overcome domestic issues. He did not know the hidden ugly realities of her husband's life. Mrs. Alving revealed sordid incidents that she faced in her life with her after marriage. Manders was ignorant to these developments. Her life was not so cosy and lovely as it seemed outwardly. Her son had come after the gap of two years. Oswald remained separated from her mother since childhood.

Mrs. Alving. Yes, am I not a lucky woman! It is more than two years since he was home at last, and he has promised to stay the whole winter with me. (16)

He was a well-known painter of Europe. He had visited several countries of Europe. He was an artist of well repute. Manders had no good opinion about Mrs. Alving concerning his relation with her son. He wanted that mother and son should live together. Manders was critical about Oswald's visit to Rome and Paris leaving his own home. He felt that Oswald did not groom under the shadow of emotional warmth. He felt his relation with his mother was devoid of love and affection. He was not aware about the problems faced by Mrs. Alving in her conjugal life. He remained busy with his meetings and he had no knowledge of Mrs. Alving's real position. He always remained engaged in his vestry meeting and committees. Mrs. Alving praised her son and told Manders that he had changed in his physical appearance. She wanted to keep her son under her protection.

Mrs. Alving. Yes, but he has his mother here, you see. Bless the dear boy, he has got a corner in his heart for his mother still.

Manders. Oh, it would be very sad if absence and preoccupation with such a thing as Art were to dull the natural affections. (16)

Manders had no fair opinion about Mrs. Alving. He disliked the reading of the books by Mrs. Alving which she had kept in her small library. He considered that these insignificant books have no place among the civilized and cultured people. These books provoke the opinion not in good sense, on the contrary but these books destroy the character of an individual. Mrs. Alving was an avid reader. She defended the reading of books. Manders did not support her. He considered that reading of such cheap books turned the people astray. Mrs. Alving argued that she attained wisdom after reading these books and overcome the riddles of life.

Mrs. Alving. But what is the particular objection that you have to these books? ...
In fact, you don't know anything about what you are denouncing?

Manders. I have read quite enough about these books to disapprove of them.
(17)

Manders disliked Mrs. Alving's decision because she did not keep her son at home. He also felt that Captain Alving suffered too much because of her erratic behaviour. Mrs. Alving had entirely different opinion concerning the mundane affairs of life from Manders. She formed her own opinion and ideas without getting influenced by others. Manders opined that sometimes in personal life people need to rely on the opinion of other people. Mrs. Alving argued that these books accentuate her intellectual inclination to understand the intricacies of life. Manders disliked it and told her that because of such unsound arguments she separated her son at very early age. Manders also praised her because she decided to build the orphanage in the sacred memory of her departed husband, Captain Alving. It was nothing but a way to repent the past unethical activities of Captain Alving by his wife Mrs. Alving. Moreover, Mrs. Alving did not want that her son Oswald should inherit a single penny from

her father's property. Mrs. Alving asked about the deeds of the property of the orphanage. They talked over the legal issues. Manders wanted to know about the insurance of the orphanage from Mrs. Alving. They talked on this matter. Lastly, they decided not to ensure the orphanage as it was a charitable organisation. They left the matter on the will of God. Initially, Mrs. Alving wanted to do insurance of the orphanage because she had a pragmatic view on these matters but Manders frustrated her. Manders told that they should have faith in divine protection of the orphanage. He also told if the orphanage will be insured, it will invite the attention of the people. The insurance of the orphanage will certainly become an issue of debate among the people. The people might criticise it. Mrs. Alving came into the net of Manders. He was a stupid for taking such a irrational decision. He influenced Mrs. Alving with his foolish decision.

Mrs. Alving. Say no more about it, dear Mr. Manders; that quite decides it.

Manders. Then you don't wish it to be insured?

Mrs. Alving. No, we will give up the idea....

Manders. And, what is more, I certainly think that we may count upon our enterprise being attend by good fortune—indeed, that it will be under a special protection. (21-22)

The decision of Manders proved disastrous in the end and it led to heavy destruction of the orphanage. Manders lacked worldly wisdom to perceive the practical vision of life. He did not perform his work clinically. He blamed Mrs. Alving for her personal life. She had to face difficult situation. Her husband was philanderer and had kept physical relation with several women. She observed his weak moral character and took the bold but difficult decision to separate her son from his father. Manders had some specific reasons to talk with Mrs. Alving. He wanted that Mrs. Alving should give the custody of Regina to her father Engstrand. He said that Regina's father needed her company. It was not accepted to Mrs. Alving. She charged Engstrand of lack of fatherly affection which a daughter needed. He lacked the spirit and quality of a good father. Manders requested Mrs. Alving to rethink her decision she but remained unmoved. When Mrs. Alving and Manders were engaged in talking concerning various issues related to orphanage, Oswald came in the room. He wished Manders and left the place. Before leaving the room, he had a long conversation with Manders. He told bitter experiences which he faced during his childhood. His father had forced him to smoke a cigarette when he was a child. Now he had grown up. He talked the sensitive issues pertaining to marriage and sex with Manders. Oswald had entirely different opinion concerning marriage and sex. He was not a conservative man. He differed radically with Manders. Manders blamed Mrs. Alving because he considered that as a mother she did not rear well to her son. Oswald achieved nothing but learnt impractical and stupid things. Oswald supported 'live together' of a young boy and girl without marriage, if they loved each other sincerely and seriously. He also considered their offspring's born by this union as legal and acceptable in the society. Mrs. Alving agreed and supported her son's radical opinion on this issue.

Mrs. Alving. I say that Oswald was right in every single word he said.

Manders. Right? Right? To hold such principles as that?

Mrs. Alving. In my loneliness here I have to just the same opinions as he, Mrs. Manders. But I have never presumed to venture upon such topics in conversation. Now there is no need; my boy shall speak for me.
(30)

Mrs. Alving did not oppose her son's opinion about marriage and sex. In fact, she endorsed her son's stand on this sensitive issue. Manders disliked Mrs. Alving's opinion and felt that

because of the excessive reading of the cheap books her brain had turned inert. Manders reminded her past life when she was young. She had a quarrel with her husband Captain Alving. She left her house and came to Manders for shelter. She did not get any kind of moral support by Manders.

Manders. Have you forgotten that after barely a year of married life you were standing at the very edge of a precipice? — that you forsook your house and home? that you ran away from your husband—yes, Mrs. Alving, ran away— and refused to return to him in spite of his request and entreaties? (31)

Mrs. Alving had led a very unhappy married life. She had married to a person, who had a series of sexual relations outside the marital orbit. She was unable to reconcile to such a difficult situation. She came to Manders to seek his moral support. Manders was a reputed official of religious institution. He did not speak a single word of comfort and he behaved like a male chauvinist. He spoke in favour of Captain Alving. He judged the situation according to his own will and convenience.

Manders made serious allegation against the behaviour of Mrs. Alving, which had no rationality. She became the victim of her husband's nasty nature. He was the captain in the army and he wanted to seek sexual pleasure from any woman beside his wife. Mrs. Alving kept this ugly secret in her heart. Manders challenged her devotion towards her family and husband. When Alving suffered extreme mental agony she left her husband's home, to seek refuge at Manders place. Manders behaved callously and sent her back to her husband's place. She had to face psychological torture both from her husband.

Manders. It was height of imprudence, your seeking refuge with me. (32)

Manders had achieved elevated position in religious echelon and he wanted to bury his past. He behaved like a hypocrite. Instead of sorting out the problem of Helen Alving in amicable way he sent her back to her husband to face problems. He charged her as a guilty wife and callous mother. Mrs. Alving heard these things silently but when it became beyond endurance, she showed him true picture. Manders had never visited the Alvings after their marriage. He was known to Mrs. Alving before her marriage. After the death of her husband, Manders visited her place, only to settle the business-related issue of orphanage. The orphanage was dedicated in the memory of Captain Alving. Mrs. Alving was concerned to family pride despite her husband was a profligate. He never remained truthful to his wife. She never uttered a single word in public against her husband, keeping the family honour in her mind. It became unbearable to Mrs. Alving, when Manders blamed her for rocky relation with her husband. He did not fathom the death of truth. Manders had become a public figure. He was a respectable person in the society. He sent Mrs. Alving to her husband's place. He thought that he had taken right decision. But in the end, this decision of Manders proved disastrous for Mrs. Alving and Oswald, her son. The conversation between Manders and Mrs. Alving speak in volume about their clandestine love affair during youth.

Mrs. Alving. Yes, by forcing me to submit to what you called my duty and my obligations; by praising as right and just what my whole soul revolted against, as it would against something abominable. That was what led me to examine your teachings critically... Call it rather the most ignominious defeat of your life.

Manders. It was the greatest victory of my life, Helen, victory over myself.....

Mrs. Alving. Do you believe what you say?

Manders. Helen—!

Mrs. Alving. One so easily forgets one's own feelings

Manders. Not I. I am the same as I always was (47-48)

The conversation between Manders and Mrs. Alving give ample evidence that they had soft corner for each other. Manders tried to downplay it. Mrs. Alving had desired that Manders should give her shelter at the time of crisis but he refused it. The same Manders called her a failed woman. He called her a unsuccessful wife and callous mother. He did not know the psychological torture and emotional starvation of this helpless and feeble woman. She faced every kind of trouble. She called Manders average and common people who borrowed opinion from others. He lacked the intellectual depth to comprehend the situation of the people.

Mrs. Alving. Yes, yes, — very well. What I mean is this, that when you condemn my conduct as a wife you have nothing more to go upon than ordinary public opinion.

Manders. I admit it. What then?...

Mrs. Alving. The truth is this, that my husband died just as great a profligate as he had been all his life... After nineteen years of married life, just as profligate — ... That was what the doctor who attended him called it. (34)

The buried truth of Captain Alving's character surfaced before Manders. Manders was astonished to know it. He had never expected such a serious flaw in the character of the captain. Their marriage was solemnised by none the else but Manders himself. This marriage led to a horrible situation in Helen's life. If he would have known her problems earlier, probably the situation would have not been deteriorated.

Manders. It makes my brain reel. To think that your marriage—all the years of wedded life you spent with your husband—were nothing but a hidden abyss of misery.

Mrs. Alving. That and nothing else. Now you know. (34-35)

Now it became crystal clear to Manders that Mrs. Alving was not a failed wife but a suffering wife. Her husband Captain Alving never remained a truthful husband. He was emotionally alienated from his home and wife. He dared to make physical relation with Joanna, the maid servant, employed by the Alvings. Captain Alving was a rich man. After marriage, Helen Alving became the sole possessor of his entire wealth and fortune but she did not become the queen of his bed and heart. When Joanna became pregnant from Captain, she was compelled to leave the house. She was married to Engstrand. Regina came in the womb of Joanna before her marriage to Engstrand. Mrs. Alving disclosed before Manders that Regina was the product of illicit relation between Captain Alving and Joanna.

Mrs. Alving. There was no chance of mistake, more's the pity Joanna was obliged to confess it to me —and my husband couldn't deny it. So, there was nothing else to do but to hush it up. (42)

Joanna was given seventy pounds to leave the Alving's house and keep her mouth shut. Mrs. Alving considered Regina as the living legacy of her dead husband. She was given good education. She became cultured and virtuous like a civilized girl. She developed early with enticing figure. Oswald was attracted towards her, she tried to curtail his passion. They were in close proximity to become life partner. Mrs. Alving revealed the truth. Regina left the Alvings immediately when she came to know her blood relation with Oswald. She prevented both Oswald and Regina from advancing disastrous physical situation. Mrs. Alving had no regret when the orphanage was gutted into fire. She considered that the destruction of

orphanage was a divine punishment to the Alving. She only wanted to address the pending legal issues pertaining to orphanage. As a mother she tried to give every comfort to her son. Oswald, her son had inherited syphilis from his father. It was a deadly disease. Oswald wanted to end his life. He wanted Morphine powder from his mother which she declined. Her motherly affection prevented her from taking life of her son.

Mrs. Alving. (with a loud scream). I !

Oswald. Who has a better right than you?

Mrs. Alving. I! Your mother!

Oswald. Just for that reason.

Mrs. Alving. I, who gave you your life.

Oswald. I never asked you for life. And what kind of a life was it that you gave me? I don't want it! You shall take it back. (89)

Mrs. Alving is the tragic projection of a helpless mother and suffering wife. The life of Helen Alving was bound in intense agony, pain and suffering. Captain Alving, the late husband of Mrs. Alving had given her nothing except unending pains of life. She faced it resolutely and fought valiantly to overcome it. Her suffering was horrendous. The suffering was Oswald was poignant. Regina left the home of the Alving. The play is devoid of emotional warmth. It is emotionally starved play.

Reference:

1. *Ghosts*, Henrik Ibsen, translated by R. Farquharson Sharp (Digireads. Com Publishing, Stilwell, KS, 66085) 2005, P.16. All subsequent references to the book will be incorporated in the text.