

Newspapers in Two Ibsen Plays: Some Sociological and Political Issues

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I say: "The minority is always right." I am of course not thinking of the minority of reactionaries who have been left astern by the big central party which we call liberal; I mean the minority which forges ahead in territory which the majority has not yet reached. --Henrik Ibsen

Abstract

Though Henrik Ibsen is mostly given to be a champion of freedom in general and freedom of expression in particular, we find him checking related matters in much further ramifications and dialectics. Two of his plays give us scope of marking and assessing his closer looks at newspaper, for example, in general and two newspapers in particular. The plays are *An Enemy of the People* and *Rosmersholm*. The newspapers are the *People's Herald* and *The Lighthouse*. Ibsen's expository looks at these exemplify his characteristic manner of probing into and presenting truths in very revealing divisions and tensions. He is found to be closely informed about the political economy and such other motivators of different components of society and culture.

Keywords: Freedom of expression, social transformation, media capital, laboratory science, compact majority

1.

Henrik Ibsen lived at a revolutionary time. He was twenty years old in 1848—the “Year of Revolution.” That’s when newspaper came to him not as a conventional item of modern life, but as a tool of social transformation. Christopher Innes writes, “In 1850, moved by the political passions that had swept Europe, Ibsen helped to establish a short-lived highly political newspaper, *Andrimmer*, which called for the dethroning of the Swedish King and the founding of a socialist republic in Norway” (Innes 7). In 1851, Ibsen had “a narrow escape” when

H[h]is *Andrimmer* co-founders, who had been responsible for the most revolutionary of the pieces in the newspaper, were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms. According to his first biographer, Edmund Gosse, this led to Ibsen’s lifelong rejection of practical political involvement. However, by joining the Norske Teater in 1852, Ibsen placed himself at the forefront of the cultural struggle. (Innes7)

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2.

A newspaper titled *People's Herald* plays a crucial role in *An Enemy of the People*. And this was surely a part of the playwright's plan. For, we are to remember that writing *An Enemy* had much to do with the reception of *Ghosts* and the role of the press at that time. Michael Meyer lets us know the following:

The extremely hostile reception which *Ghosts* had received in Scandinavia on its appearance in December 1881 drove Ibsen into a fury. 'What is one to say of the attitude of the so-called liberal press?' he wrote to Georg Brandes on 3 January 1882. "These leaders who talk and write of freedom and progressiveness and at the same time allow themselves to be the slaves of the supposed opinions of their subscribers!..." (108)

Helge Ronning also marks the "central importance" of the newspaper for *An Enemy*, and to explain, calls it a "part of the public sphere" (110). He sees the press in its generally evolving role and its particular role for *An Enemy of the People*. What he writes dispels one's absolute senses about the importance of the press:

Originally the press had as its task to formulate political opinions, which were to be presented to the public for discussion. Ideally the press was supposed to be independent of capital interests. As the political struggle intensified, however, the press came to be linked both with party-political factions and with the embryo of media capital. The image of the free and independent newspaper was replaced by a view of the press as a mouthpiece of particular interests. It is this development that forms the basis for the growth of the modern media structure. It is particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century that Scandinavia witnesses a remarkable increase both in the size of the reading public and in the numbers of newspapers published. (*Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen* 110-111)

To present the particular place of the *People's Herald* in *An Enemy*, Helge Ronning discusses relationship between two sets of people— Dr. Stockmann and Petra in one set and Hovstad and Billing in the other; he writes,

Dr. Stockmann and Petra's relationship to Hovstad and Billing is a thematical presentation of the conflict between an early-liberal image of the press on the one hand and an insight in the new role of the newspapers. Father and daughter believe that it is possible to uphold the original image of the free and independent press. Hovstad and Billing, by being dependent on Aslaksen's capital, by knowing that they have to cater for an increasing mass public, and by having an understanding of the political process, know that newspapers are nothing but mouthpieces of particular interests. They cannot transgress the boundaries drawn by the pressure groups they are dependent upon. (111)

Ronning's account impresses us about Ibsen's volume of knowledge of social history that he proves in writing plays like *An Enemy* and his planfulness therein for executing certain grand exposures there. We mention and quote these in order to disarm those who finish by locating a mere individualist or a simple liberal in Henrik Ibsen.

Asbjorn Aarseth also goes for sociological explanation, finds it to be a "two-sided transformation" in *An Enemy of the People* and explains it to be as follows:

On one side, the spokesmen for liberal opposition, Hovstad, Billing and Aslaksen--the newspaper editor, the journalist, and the printer—at first encourage the doctor to proceed with the writing of articles informing the public of the truth concerning the unhealthy condition of the water supplying the Baths. Soon they turn their backs on him, realizing that his mission, because of severe economic consequences for the town and its house-owners,

is not likely to have public support. On the other side, there is the radical transformation of Dr. Stockmann himself. In the words of Brian Johnston, it is an extreme dialectic development “from altruistic doctor to dishonoured prophet, from the healer of physical ills to the fierce healer of spiritual ills, from the friend of the community to its designated enemy, and from the citizen to the individual”. (Aarseth 117)

As given above, the conflict in the play is quite political and class-political in character, the initial supporters of the main actor, Dr. Stockmann --Hovstad, Billing and Aslaksen-- do not stand their grounds. The economic implications of the clash are shown to be creating such pressure and lure as make the individuals party to it develop gross deviations or betrayals. From inside their backgrounds also, they prove to be most unreliable and vacillating. And, coming from his reading of a text dealing with tussles between issues of mass people’s basic health and economic interests of other groups of people, Asbjorn Aarseth’s account is one sociology or political economy of their apparently high-sounding politics and logic for that. *An Enemy of the People* is one of Henrik Ibsen’s testimonies to his big interest and competence in recording relevant changes in elites’, intellectuals’ and bureaucrats’ roles and their betrayal of people’s crucial interests. Ibsen’s exposition of the crisis and its fallouts has glaring elements of historical materialism in it, and therefore may be considered rather Marxist. In consideration of Ibsen’s sensational handling of issues connected with people’s vital interest in *An Enemy*, we should rather in connection with this very play remember how Ibsen once remarked (to Kristofer Hansen, “the writer who was a part-original of Hjalmar Ekdal in *The Wild Duck*,”): “The only people with whom I really have any sympathy are the nihilists and socialists”. This need not be taken literally, but in its due spirit. But, it must not be completely overlooked either. We may remember also how “Ibsen did not object when, in 1890, Bernard Shaw identified ‘Ibsenism’ with socialism—indeed, he protested when some newspapers asserted that he had nothing to do with socialism” (Michael Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen, Plays: Two* 114). That Ibsen’s was no conventional misanthropy or aristocracy in cases like the one we find in *An Enemy* becomes clear from what he wrote to Georg Brandes as if to clarify all related confusions. In recent years however, Bangladesh appears to have reached a level and kind of social development that impels a closer comparison between Ibsen’s Norway and present-time Bangladesh. We are now holding liberal and neo-liberal forces of our country responsible for many lapses and slides. Ibsen’s words in his letter to Georg Brandes appear very much pertinent to our situation and absolves him totally:

I become more and more convinced that there is something demoralizing about involving oneself in politics and attaching oneself to a party. Under no circumstances will I ever link myself with any party that has the majority behind it. ... I say: “The minority is always right.” I am of course not thinking of the minority of reactionaries who have been left astern by the big central party which we call liberal; I mean the minority which forges ahead in territory which the majority has not yet reached. I believe that he is right who is most closely attuned to the future... For me liberty is the first condition of life, and the highest. At home people don’t bother much about liberty but only about liberties—a few more or few less, according to the party standpoint. ... (Meyer 108)

Helge Ronning stresses on Dr. Stockmann’s different individualism, about “the incongruity between Dr. Stockmann’s values and the values of the society surrounding

him" (114). Let us take some of our own stock of the happenings and the resultant changes in Dr. Stockmann which so many of us have found shocking or unacceptable. We shall check and examine if rather we are the people who are irresponsible and conformists. I'm sure this will be like checking Hamlet's endless procrastination and finding that more than alright. In Act 1 of *An Enemy*, Hovstad, the Editor of *The People's Herald*, introduces his group of people even as "radical journalists", and declare theirs to be an intense conflict with the Magistrate or Mayor, "I expect we radical journalists stuck in his gullet". But, what transpires soon and finally is that this editor and others in the *People's Herald* are concerned much more with trading and business than with people's health, freedom of expression or any such ideal. Out of their petty-bourgeois zeal, they had initially been so enthusiastic about Dr. Stockmann's 'discovery.' Then they promised him all support, so exhaustively! And, for those who cannot make out Dr. Stockmann's maniac anger or so-called misanthropy (he threatened the town-people with extermination, we surely remember), we need to re-look at the scene of the declaration of support and commendation coming from people who would so soon conspire to form the notoriously "compact majority" and declare the doctor "an enemy of the people" (139). But, there is a limit to a human's capacity to take all kinds of somersaults from people sounding so positive at one moment and so negative at the next. Let us take a re-look at the scene of the report coming from the University laboratory and people present responding with so much of praise and warmth for the physician, Dr. Stockmann:

Hovstad. May I have your permission to print a short piece about your discovery in the *People's Tribune*?

Dr. Stockmann: I'd be very grateful if you would.

Hovstad: I think it's desirable that the community should be informed as quickly as possible.

Dr. Stockmann: Yes, yes, of course.

...

Billing: You'll be the first citizen in the town, Doctor, by Jingo, you will!

Dr. Stockmann: (walks round contentedly). Oh, nonsense!—and struck lucky, that's all. All the same--!

Billing: Hovstad, don't you think the town ought to organize a torchlight procession in honour of Dr. Stockmann?

Hovstad: I'll suggest it, certainly.

Billing: And I'll have a word with Aslaksen.

Dr. Stockmann: No, my dear friends, please don't bother with that nonsense. I don't want any fuss made. And if the Baths Committee should decide to raise my salary, I won't accept it! It's no good Catherine, I won't accept it! (139-40)

This scene is so important also because it dispels as nonsense latter-time defamation-charges brought against Dr. Stockmann—against his pride, his craving for higher salary, etc., for example. He is found to be so gentle, modest and measured in his senses; here now he is found to be not even suspecting any opposition from the Mayor. In reply to Petra's query, "What do you think Uncle Peter will say, father?", the physician gives so simple and positive an answer, "What can he say? He must be grateful that so important a

fact has been brought to light.” But, almost all these people give up all senses of respect for science and truth, for people’s long-term and true well-being, and finally, for the decency and honesty in a professional. They succumb to their so-called anxiety over the expenses of relaying of the water-pipes for the Baths; theirs then is a bigger concern for the profit coming from the tourists and patients. So, so quickly they join hands and heads together to put up that “compact majority” necessary for turning yesterday’s “first citizen in the town” into today’s “enemy of the people.” Actually, this was turning everything—truth, welfare, economy—upside down. And, these happenings in the play really amounted to a spiritual death of the whole community in the town, almost all of them collaborating with this ‘liberal’ project of democracy floated definitely by a big number or party of people. And, under the pressure of a failure to establish the findings of laboratory science, not being permitted by popular vote even to talk about his irrefutable “discovery,” Dr. Stockmann then performed the “monkey tricks” of shifting to the only level available to him, of spirituality. Henrik Ibsen executes in miniature the whole historical process mankind has gone through in this—a divine enlargement of the level of reality and talking helplessly about that. But, even taking of this escape-way did not save Dr. Stockmann. So much powerful does money—“the only visible god”—prove itself to be! In the play, we find plotters against truth or science using democracy and vote manipulatively, and making a hell of the physical scientist’s life. But, have we, living critics and intellectuals, stopped siding with the kind of plotters we find in *An Enemy*?

4.

We have a shorter account about the newspaper in *Rosmersholm*. It’s titled *The Lighthouse*, we have said. But, the account is no less interesting or important for that.

Rosmersholm is a play mostly about female power, power of Rebecca West. Remarkably, it places the case of apostasy of a former pastor also, and that can be considered to have composed the focal point of the play. A whole community is shown to be getting polarized over this happening and related circumstances, and three suicides take place. As religion is shown to be working less than earlier as outlet for people’s vehement senses of self, three persons, with very big senses of self, take their own lives. Critics, however, often overlook this triggering kind of incident taking place in the area of religion, and finish by describing *Rosmersholm* as a play about the inescapability of past times’ residual impacts, etc. This is definite missing or killing of the edge of radical consciousness in a playwright whose real life bears records of clear upholding of nationalistic, democratic, liberal and socialistic consciousness.

Before going to address the issues of female power and apostasy as presented in *Rosmersholm*, I would like to elaborate a little more on the way critics so often interpret it as a play only about “inner experience” or spiritual questionings coming from within an individual soul. This appears to be characteristic of a trend of overlooking a very real milieu of social crisis in that play arising out of historical changes in the nineteenth-century Europe in the directions of liberalism and atheism. Historical Enlightenment contributed to composing most of this milieu. In *Rosmersholm*, liberal and radical ideas are shown to have infected the family of even Dr. Kroll, the topmost conservative of the small town wherein the play is set. Ibsen has presented one leftist editor-politician, Peder Mortensgaard, to be enjoying confidence not only of the “poorer people” of the town but

of “some besides the poor folk” also (82). Beata, wife of the most aristocratic person and ex-Pastor, happens to be one of this latter group. And, one can safely guess about Ibsen’s guiding and final attitude towards Mortensgaard by considering the following paragraph of Beret Wicklund’s essay, “Ibsen’s Demons: *Rosmersholm* as Gothic Drama”:

It is interesting that the true survivor of this drama is Mortensgaard. He is the man of the future. He is certainly not presented as a hero, as even he has learned to adapt to and to play the power game of the bourgeois culture. But, the important difference between him and Kroll is that Mortensgaard’s first social fall was not a result of an act done out of true love. This establishes love and power as opposites in this drama. Where power rules, true love cannot be achieved. (340)

To get more about the importance of *The Lighthouse* and its editor, Mortensgaard, for the play, let us now mark how Ibsen introduces it and him. Almost at the beginning of the first Act, we find Rosmer, Rebekka and Kroll talking about the situation in their town. About his joining politics, Kroll tells the others: “Now that the Radicals have got so shockingly powerful, it’s high time, now--. And, so I have persuaded our little circle in town to draw closer together” (37). Kroll, being Headmaster of a school, says, “... the spirit of revolt has made its way even into the school” (37). The conversation follows:

Rosmer: Into the school? Not in your school, surely?

Kroll: It certainly has. In my own school. What do you think? It’s come to my knowledge that the boys in the senior class—that’s to say some of the boys—have had a secret society going for more than six months and been taking in Mortensgaard’s paper.

Rebekka: What, *The Lighthouse*?

Kroll: Yes. Wholesome diet for the minds of future public servants, isn’t it? But the saddest part of the business is that it’s the ablest boys in the class who’ve conspired and hatched this plot against me. It’s only the dunces at the bottom of the class that have stood out.

Rebekka: Do you feel this so keenly, Dr. Kroll?

Kroll: Feel it keenly! To see myself checked and thwarted like that in my life’s work. [More quietly.] But I feel almost like saying that that must take its course. For I’ve still got to tell you the worst.... (37)

Kroll then relates how his home and family-life also have been highly impacted by *The Lighthouse*, “Will you believe it, that my own children--. Well, in fact—it’s Laurits that’s the ringleader in the conspiracy at school. And Hilda has embroidered a red portfolio to keep *The Lighthouse* in.” (38) Kroll shares more with the other two persons as to how his now is a changed house. He urges upon Rosmer to help his old friends, “Do what the rest of us are doing. Take a hand in it as best as you can.” (39) Kroll narrates the situation by adding: “You haven’t the least notion what the state of affairs is all over the country. Almost every idea’s turned upside down. It’s going to be a Herculean task to clear away that mass of error” (39). Kroll holds *The Lighthouse* responsible for the big damage coming; he says, “Just you look into the opinions that are coming among these radicals, out here and in town. They’re neither more nor less than the wisdom that’s proclaimed in *The Lighthouse*”(40). Actually, we have two newspapers in *Rosmersholm*, and Kroll then mentions how the conservatives were going to float the second one, to counter the impact of the first one, *The Lighthouse*. And actually, it was with the aim of persuading Rosmer

to take the charge of leading the conservative newspaper editorially that Kroll had appeared at Rosmer's place. We have the following conversation:

Rebekka: I think it's rather odd that you and your friends don't start something in opposition.

Kroll: That's just what we're going to do. We brought *The County News* today. There was no difficulty about the money side of it, but —[Turning to Rosmer.] Well, now I come to my real errand here. It's the management, the editorial management, that's giving us trouble, you see. Tell me Rosmer, wouldn't you—for the sake of the good cause—feel called upon to take it over?

Rosmer [half-horrified]: I

Rebekka: Why, how can you think of such a thing!

Kroll: It's perfectly natural that you should have a horror of public meetings and not want to expose yourself to the treatment one gets there. But an editor's work goes on in the background, or to be precise—

Rosmer: No, no, my dear man, you must not ask me for this. (40)

What more can be interesting and enlightening for readers or audience is the extent of similarity of responses of conservatives and liberals and/or pseudo-liberals in the play to Rosmer's "abandoning ... religion." For, while conservative Kroll and his group leave no stone unturned to keep back Rosmer within the confines of Christianity, liberal Mortensgaard and his people also insist on his joining their side of politics of "liberal party" with his Christian and church-related identity intact. One can mark and wonder at how open and bold apostasy is found to be harmful even by the liberal politicians. To impress about the peculiarity and complexity of this situation, let me quote from a part of the relevant dialogue between Rosmer and Mortensgaard:

Mortensgaard: Well, because you see, sir--. I don't suppose you're quite so familiar with all the circumstances as I am. But if you've come over now to the liberal party--and if you want, as Miss West said, to take part in this movement—well, no doubt you're doing it with the intention of being as useful, both to the party and to the movement, as you possibly can.

Rosmer: Yes, I sincerely want to.

Mortensgaard: Quite. But then I must just tell you, sir, if you come forward openly with this business of your giving up the Church, you will tie your own hands right away.

Rosmer: Do you think so?

Mortensgaard: Yes, You may be sure there won't be much you can do then; not here in these arts. And besides, we've quite enough free-thinkers on hand, sir. I nearly said, we've all too many of those gentry. What the party wants is the Christian element—something everybody has to respect. That's what we're so dreadfully short of. And so it's wisest for you to keep quiet about all those things that don't concern the public. You see, that's what I mean. (68-69)

One can remember how very similar to the above is Kroll's crumb of advice to Rosmer and how unscrupulous he sounds in that, "If this living with Miss West is to go on, its absolutely essential that you should conceal the change of mind—the sad disloyalty—that she has led you into. ... It's not in the least necessary to broadcast a thing like that over

the whole countryside” (64). Such pieces of exchange do drop relevant pieces of information and insight about religion’s really big hold over mass people’s psyche, and also about the absence of a square readiness even in liberal politicians to face this situation. Ibsen draws our attention to a big number of equally important aspects and parts of this impasse-situation. Through the role of Dr. Kroll, he clearly exposes how religion is considered so very much valuable by the conservatives, how unscrupulous they are in the question of perpetuating its stronghold, etc. But, like a true radical, Ibsen exposes the compromising and opportunistic attitudes with the liberal and/or radical forces also.

Doesn’t Henrik Ibsen appear to have visualized present-day Bangladesh?

5.

Coming again and finally to look into the role of newspaper in some Ibsen plays, contemporary Bangladeshi life or any such matter, we find that academics and critics of present time also do it like certain characters in *An Enemy* etc. They turn themselves into Peter Stockmann and his band of people. There is one person turned into Dr. Stockmann, another is a Holster. Even prominent critics and academics do not highlight certain events or aspects of Ibsen's life, they suppress some certain trends and leanings in his activism, ideas and thoughts. So, still now there are groups of "enemy" and friend of the people and Ibsen, the playwright. Marking this has given me much fun. I've felt vindicated in my ideas of Marxist aesthetics, and enjoyed writing this paper very much.

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