

"SUBJECTIVITY AND SELFHOOD: EXPLORING IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE WOMEN OF IBSEN'S LATER PLAYS"

Hunmily Rongpharpi¹, Dr. K.P.Sousa²

¹Research Scholar, Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya

²Supervisor, Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya

Abstract:

This research examines the complex portrayals of female subjectivity and selfhood in Henrik Ibsen's later plays—*Hedda Gabler*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *Rosmersholm*, *When We Dead Awaken*, and *John Gabriel Borkman*. Drawing from feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and existential philosophy, the study explores how Ibsen constructs women characters as sites of conflict between internal desire and external societal expectation. The analysis reveals recurring themes of repression, resistance, moral agency, and the politics of speech and silence. Each protagonist negotiates identity formation through a distinct mode of self-actualization, reflecting diverse responses to patriarchy, cultural norms, and personal crisis. Through a comparative framework, the research traces the evolution of female agency in Ibsen's dramaturgy and highlights his anticipatory engagement with modern feminist concerns. Ultimately, the study contributes to the scholarship on gender and modern drama by offering a nuanced understanding of how Ibsen's women embody the contradictions and possibilities inherent in the quest for autonomy and selfhood.

Keywords: Female Subjectivity, Identity Formation, Selfhood, Gender and Agency, Existential Freedom, Women in Literature

I. Introduction

Background and Rationale

Henrik Ibsen, widely regarded as the father of modern drama, revolutionized the theatrical landscape of the 19th century by introducing a realism that departed from the melodrama and romanticism of his predecessors. His plays, particularly those from his later period, showcase a deep engagement with issues of individual freedom, social hypocrisy, and gender dynamics. Ibsen's dramaturgy is notable not merely for its narrative innovation but for its sustained interrogation of the individual's place within—and resistance to—the societal order. Among his most enduring contributions is his nuanced portrayal of women as central figures in the drama of self-realization and social confrontation.

In his later works such as *Hedda Gabler*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *Rosmersholm*, *When We Dead Awaken*, and *John Gabriel Borkman*, Ibsen positions female characters at the heart of existential and ethical inquiry. These women are not merely victims of patriarchal oppression; rather, they are complex individuals navigating the turbulent terrain of identity, freedom, and personal agency. Their struggles reflect a deep psychological and philosophical concern with the formation of selfhood in restrictive cultural contexts. These characters often grapple with inner conflict, societal expectation, and suppressed desire—elements that underscore the thematic concern with subjectivity and the quest for self-definition.

The concepts of **subjectivity** and **selfhood** are central to both modern literature and feminist theory, offering critical frameworks to examine how identity is constructed, challenged, and transformed. Subjectivity refers to the internal processes by which individuals come to understand and assert themselves, often in opposition to external forces that seek to define them.

Selfhood, meanwhile, encompasses the evolving sense of personal identity, autonomy, and moral agency. Within feminist literary discourse, these notions are crucial in analyzing how women articulate their presence in narratives that have historically silenced or marginalized them. Ibsen's later plays serve as a fertile site for exploring these dynamics, as they engage with the internal consciousness of women characters who resist, negotiate, or succumb to the identities imposed upon them.

In this context, the present research seeks to critically examine how Ibsen's later female protagonists navigate the dialectic between societal constraint and individual self-assertion. Through a feminist-literary lens, the paper aims to illuminate how the processes of subjectivity and selfhood are dramatized in Ibsen's work, and what these representations suggest about the gendered politics of identity formation in modern drama.

Research Problem: How does Ibsen construct and represent the evolving identity of women?

Aims and Objectives

- To explore how Ibsen portrays subjectivity and identity formation in his female characters.
- To analyze how socio-cultural pressures shape women's selfhood in Ibsen's later plays.

Research Questions

- How do the female characters negotiate autonomy and identity?
- In what ways do personal desires conflict with societal expectations?

Methodology

Feminist Literary Criticism: This research applies feminist literary criticism to analyze how Ibsen's female characters navigate patriarchal constraints and assert their identities. The study draws on the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Elaine Showalter to explore gender roles, autonomy, and the politics of selfhood.

Psychoanalytic and Existential Approaches: The psychoanalytic framework, informed by Freudian and Lacanian theories, helps uncover the unconscious motivations, repressions, and desires of the characters. Simultaneously, existential concepts such as freedom, alienation, and authenticity, based on the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Sartre, are employed to interpret the characters' struggles for meaning and identity.

Textual Analysis: A close reading of selected later plays by Henrik Ibsen is conducted to examine how subjectivity and selfhood are constructed through language, dialogue, symbolism, and character development. This qualitative textual analysis enables a deep exploration of identity formation in the dramatic context.

Scope and Limitations

This study focuses specifically on Henrik Ibsen's later plays, where the themes of subjectivity, selfhood, and identity formation are most prominently developed through complex female protagonists. The selected plays include:

- *Hedda Gabler*
- *The Lady from the Sea*

- *Rosmersholm*
- *When We Dead Awaken*
- *John Gabriel Borkman*

These works are chosen for their rich psychological depth, symbolic structure, and portrayal of women negotiating autonomy within restrictive socio-cultural frameworks.

Limitations: The study does not cover Ibsen's earlier plays such as *A Doll's House* or *Ghosts*, which, though significant, fall outside the defined temporal and thematic focus. Additionally, the research is based on English translations of the original Norwegian texts, which may limit the interpretation of certain linguistic nuances. The paper also concentrates primarily on literary and philosophical analysis and does not offer an exhaustive socio-historical or biographical critique of Ibsen's life and times.

Theoretical Framework

This research draws upon a multidisciplinary theoretical foundation to examine how subjectivity and selfhood are constructed and expressed in the female characters of Ibsen's later plays. The theoretical framework incorporates key concepts from philosophy, psychology, feminism, and literary criticism.

Concept of Subjectivity

Definitions and Debates: From Descartes to Foucault: The notion of subjectivity has evolved significantly over time. René Descartes posited the rational, autonomous self through his famous dictum "*Cogito, ergo sum*", which laid the groundwork for modern conceptions of self-consciousness. However, post-structural thinkers like Michel Foucault challenged this view, arguing that the subject is not innate but historically and discursively constructed. Foucault's concept of the "subjected subject" highlights how power and knowledge shape identity within social institutions.

Feminist Perspectives: Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray: Feminist theorists have critically redefined subjectivity from a gendered lens. Simone de Beauvoir asserted in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," emphasizing the social construction of gender. Judith Butler expanded this idea with her theory of **performativity**, suggesting that gender is constituted through repeated acts and discourses. Luce Irigaray, meanwhile, focused on the role of language and sexual difference in marginalizing women's subjectivity, calling for a new symbolic order that gives voice to female desire and identity.

Selfhood and Identity Formation

Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory: Erikson's theory of psychosocial development outlines identity as a developmental process shaped by the individual's interaction with social realities. His concept of **identity crisis** is particularly useful in analyzing Ibsen's female characters, who are often caught between internal desires and societal expectations.

Julia Kristeva: Semiotic and Symbolic Identity: Kristeva distinguishes between the **semiotic** (pre-linguistic, maternal) and **symbolic** (structured, paternal) dimensions of language and identity. Her theory allows for an exploration of how female identity in literature is torn between emotional, bodily experience and culturally imposed structures of meaning.

Intersectionality and Performativity (Butler): The theory of **intersectionality**, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw and extended by Butler and others, examines how multiple axes of identity—gender, class, sexuality—intersect in the production of subjectivity. Butler’s performative theory further underscores how identity is not fixed but continually enacted and reconstituted through social scripts and norms.

Feminist Literary Criticism

Elaine Showalter’s Gynocriticism: Showalter advocates for a distinct female literary tradition that examines women as writers and characters within their own historical and cultural contexts. Gynocriticism focuses on women’s experiences, language, and identity formation outside male literary frameworks—an approach that aligns with the aims of this study.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s “Madwoman in the Attic”: In their seminal work, Gilbert and Gubar argue that female authors and characters in literature often reflect internalized patriarchal constraints, symbolized by the “madwoman” figure. This concept is relevant for analyzing Ibsen’s female protagonists, many of whom display tension between outward conformity and inner rebellion, psychological distress, or existential angst.

III. Contextualizing Ibsen’s Later Plays

Historical and Social Backdrop

Henrik Ibsen’s later plays emerged during a period of profound social transformation and moral conservatism in **late 19th-century Europe**. This era was marked by the rigid structuring of gender roles, with **patriarchy, institutional marriage, and strict moral codes** serving as the pillars of bourgeois respectability. Women were expected to embody the ideals of domesticity, chastity, and self-sacrifice, confined largely to the roles of wives and mothers, with little or no autonomy in personal, legal, or economic spheres. Public discourse surrounding female desire, education, or intellectual agency was limited and often censored, reinforcing the boundaries of what was deemed “acceptable” feminine behavior.

In this socio-cultural context, the figure of the “**New Woman**”—an emerging symbol of female emancipation and rebellion—was both feared and fascinated. However, the broader societal structure remained resistant to gender reform. Theatrical stages, like literature, became battlegrounds for contesting such norms, and Ibsen positioned himself at the forefront of this engagement.

Ibsen’s Position as a Proto-Feminist

Although Henrik Ibsen consistently denied affiliation with any organized feminist movement, his work unmistakably aligns with the core tenets of feminist critique. Ibsen was deeply concerned with themes of **individual freedom, personal responsibility, and the moral dilemmas inherent in social conformity**. His plays challenge the ideological foundations of patriarchal authority, particularly through the inner lives of female characters who seek authenticity in a world that denies them self-determination.

In works like *Hedda Gabler*, *The Lady from the Sea*, and *Rosmersholm*, Ibsen crafted complex female protagonists who defy the simplistic categorizations of angel, muse, or sinner. These

women are not merely symbolic or ornamental figures; they are agents of existential struggle, moral reasoning, and emotional depth. Through them, Ibsen explored the psychological and social consequences of suppressed individuality and constrained subjectivity.

The **reception of Ibsen's female characters during his time** was deeply polarized. While progressive thinkers lauded his boldness in addressing the "woman question," many critics and audiences perceived his plays as scandalous, even subversive. *A Doll's House* (though slightly earlier) sparked public outrage due to Nora's decision to leave her family—a choice that was widely condemned as immoral and dangerous. Similarly, later plays that foregrounded female disillusionment, desire, or rebellion were met with discomfort or incomprehension, indicating the cultural resistance to reimagining women's roles in society.

Thus, Ibsen's dramaturgy can be seen as an early and powerful critique of gendered subject positions, anticipating many of the concerns that would later define feminist literary and philosophical discourse. His work laid the groundwork for rethinking the representation of women in modern drama—not as static ideals, but as evolving selves engaged in the search for identity, voice, and freedom.

IV. Textual Analysis of Female Characters

Henrik Ibsen's later plays present female characters as complex embodiments of inner conflict, agency, and resistance. Each protagonist confronts a unique crisis of subjectivity shaped by personal desires, societal expectations, and existential dilemmas. The following textual analysis delves into the psychological and symbolic dimensions of these characters to explore how identity is formed, fragmented, and reclaimed.

Hedda Gabler

The Paradox of Power and Powerlessness: Hedda appears to possess social status, beauty, and intellect, yet she remains deeply constrained by the limitations of marriage and bourgeois propriety. Her seeming dominance—manifested in manipulation and detachment—is undermined by an existential powerlessness, revealing a disjunction between her inner will and external agency.

Identity Crisis and Performative Roles: Trapped in the role of a respectable wife, Hedda performs the expected femininity while internally rejecting it. Her identity crisis emerges from this tension between imposed roles and suppressed desires, highlighting Butler's theory of gender performativity.

Hedda's Agency and Ultimate Rebellion: In a final act of defiance against both societal control and personal insignificance, Hedda's suicide becomes an ambiguous gesture of rebellion. It signals both the collapse of her identity and a desperate attempt to assert control over her narrative.

The Lady from the Sea (Ellida Wangel)

Ocean as Metaphor for Fluid Identity: The sea functions as a central symbol for Ellida's emotional and psychological state—restless, fluid, and in search of freedom. Her identity is not fixed but shaped by shifting desires and memories, echoing Julia Kristeva's semiotic space.

Desire, Choice, and Existential Freedom: Ellida's yearning for the unknown reflects a deeper need for existential freedom. When she is finally granted the autonomy to choose, her decision to stay becomes meaningful—it is not submission but a conscious act of self-definition.

Reclaiming Subjectivity through Decision-Making: The act of choosing represents a reclamation of agency. Ellida's subjectivity is reasserted not by fleeing but by embracing her freedom to define the conditions of her life.

Rosmersholm (Rebecca West)

Intellectual and Moral Agency: Rebecca is portrayed as a woman of intellect and conviction, engaging in philosophical and political discussions on equal terms with Rosmer. She challenges the traditional gendered division between emotion and reason.

The Burden of Guilt and Social Norms: Despite her strength, Rebecca is haunted by guilt and internalized norms, particularly regarding her past and her influence over Rosmer's wife. This moral burden reflects the psychological cost of defying patriarchal morality.

Self-Sacrifice as a Form of Reclamation of Identity: Her final act of self-sacrifice can be interpreted as both tragic and redemptive—a reclaiming of moral autonomy in the face of social and psychological collapse. It mirrors a profound inner struggle for meaning and integrity.

When We Dead Awaken (Irene)

Artistic Muse vs. Autonomous Self: Irene has long been viewed through the eyes of the male artist as a muse, stripped of subjectivity. Her reappearance in the artist's life exposes the emotional cost of being objectified and idealized.

Memory, Desire, and Lost Selfhood: Irene is a ghostly presence—haunted by memory and longing. She represents the fragmentation of self that occurs when identity is shaped by another's gaze rather than self-authorship.

Subjectivity through Disillusionment and Confrontation: Irene's confrontation with Rubek leads to a painful realization of loss, but also an awakening. Her journey illustrates that subjectivity often emerges from rupture and recognition, even if it ends in annihilation.

John Gabriel Borkman (Ella Rentheim and Mrs. Borkman)

Competing Identities and Gendered Expectations: Ella and Mrs. Borkman represent contrasting responses to female identity. Ella seeks emotional connection and moral responsibility, while Mrs. Borkman clings to ambition and bitterness. Both reflect the struggle to define selfhood beyond male legacies.

Sacrifice, Bitterness, and the Reclaiming of Self-Worth: Ella's sacrifice and continued loyalty reveal a profound ethical subjectivity, whereas Mrs. Borkman's resentment points to the long-term effects of emotional neglect. In different ways, both women reclaim agency—one through forgiveness, the other through confrontation.

V. Comparative Analysis

Henrik Ibsen's later plays provide a layered and multifaceted portrayal of women grappling with identity, selfhood, and autonomy in a society steeped in patriarchal norms. While each character's journey is unique, several thematic strands run through these works, revealing Ibsen's consistent preoccupation with the inner lives and existential struggles of women.

Common Thematic Strands

Repression and Resistance: Across all five plays, Ibsen dramatizes the tension between internal repression and the yearning for liberation. Whether it is Hedda's repressed desire for control, Ellida's longing for the unknown, or Irene's suppressed artistic identity, each woman is shaped by a conflict between societal expectations and personal will. The narratives often pivot on the characters' attempts—whether successful or tragic—to resist the roles assigned to them.

Silence, Speech, and Subjectivity: Silence plays a crucial role in these plays, often symbolizing both submission and resistance. Hedda's cryptic utterances, Rebecca's veiled guilt, and Irene's spectral presence speak volumes about the denial of voice and agency. Yet, moments of speech—Ellida's articulation of choice, Ella Rentheim's moral clarity—become acts of self-assertion and subject formation. Ibsen uses language not just as a medium of dialogue, but as a battlefield for identity.

Female Agency vs. Societal Constraint: The female characters constantly negotiate the space between individual agency and social constraint. Their desires for freedom, love, and self-expression clash with the rigid frameworks of marriage, family, and public morality. These conflicts reflect the broader ideological tension between modern individualism and 19th-century gender norms. Ibsen's women struggle to carve out a self not as defined by their relationships with men but by their inner truth.

Differences in Modes of Self-Actualization

Hedda's Destruction vs. Ellida's Choice: Hedda Gabler embodies a destructive mode of self-assertion. Her final act of suicide is as much an escape as it is a bitter declaration of autonomy, albeit within the confines of despair. In contrast, Ellida Wangel's act of choosing to stay, after being granted freedom, marks a constructive affirmation of agency. Unlike Hedda, Ellida reclaims her subjectivity through decision-making rather than self-destruction.

Irene's Withdrawal vs. Rebecca's Moral Stance: Irene, in *When We Dead Awaken*, withdraws from life after realizing the cost of being objectified as a muse. Her silence and retreat reflect a deeply internalized form of subjectivity, marked by loss and longing. Rebecca West, however, adopts a more active moral position. Her decision to confess and ultimately sacrifice herself is a painful, yet deliberate assertion of ethical agency. While Irene fades into existential despair, Rebecca engages with guilt and moral accountability as avenues of self-definition.

These comparative insights reveal how Ibsen presents **multiple, sometimes contradictory, trajectories of female selfhood**. The interplay of repression and resistance, silence and articulation, destruction and transformation offers a rich canvas to explore the gendered politics of identity. Ibsen's dramaturgy not only challenges the societal constructs that confine women

but also opens up varied possibilities for understanding how women assert their subjectivity within, against, or beyond those confines.

Comparative Chart: Subjectivity and Selfhood in Ibsen's Later Plays

Character / Play	Form of Repression	Mode of Resistance / Selfhood	Agency Asserted Through	Outcome
Hedda Gabler (<i>Hedda Gabler</i>)	Gendered expectations, social boredom, emotional isolation	Manipulation, destruction of others (Lövborg), self-destruction	Suicide (final act of control)	Tragic – Destruction as a failed assertion of agency
Ellida Wangel (<i>The Lady from the Sea</i>)	Confinement in marriage, longing for the sea/freedom	Open articulation of desire, confrontation with past	Choosing freely to stay after being granted freedom	Empowering – Agency through conscious choice
Rebecca West (<i>Rosmersholm</i>)	Guilt over past actions, moral judgment, societal condemnation	Confession, renunciation of romantic union	Ethical self-awareness and moral responsibility	Tragic – Suicide, but with moral self-assertion
Irene (<i>When We Dead Awaken</i>)	Objectification as a muse, loss of identity, alienation from self	Withdrawal from art and human connection	Silence, existential reflection	Poetic – Death as quiet escape from objectification
Irene Ellida (contrast)	External control vs. inner yearning	Direct dialogue and negotiation with husband	Speech and mutual understanding	Constructive – Reconciliation with the self
Ella Rentheim (<i>John Gabriel Borkman</i>)	Loss of love, replaced by duty; sidelined by male ambition	Retains dignity, confronts her brother and past	Emotional maturity, moral clarity	Stoic – Uncelebrated, but morally resolute

Thematic Axes

Theme	Hedda	Ellida	Rebecca	Irene	Ella Rentheim
Repression	Social, emotional	Marital, existential	Ethical, emotional	Artistic, personal	Gendered, familial
Resistance	Destruction	Verbal negotiation	Confession, withdrawal	Silent retreat	Moral confrontation
Subjectivity	Subversive, unstable	Assertive, balanced	Conscience-driven	Dissolved, ethereal	Grounded, reflective
Resolution	Suicide (chaotic autonomy)	Choice (affirmative agency)	Suicide (ethical redemption)	Death (quiet fading)	Moral authority retained

VI. Critical Reflections

Ibsen's Anticipation of Modern Feminist Concerns: Ibsen's female protagonists challenge patriarchal expectations and question prescribed gender roles long before the formal rise of feminist literary theory. Characters like Hedda, Ellida, and Rebecca articulate desires for autonomy, echoing Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "Other" and Judith Butler's performative identity theories.

Continued Relevance in Contemporary Gender Discourse: The emotional, ethical, and existential dilemmas faced by Ibsen's women—especially around choice, agency, and societal judgment—mirror issues in modern debates on gender equality, body autonomy, and relational identity. The plays are frequently staged and analyzed in contexts of intersectionality, queer theory, and post-feminism, indicating their lasting power.

Ethical Dimensions of Identity and Self-Realization

Ibsen compels the audience to consider the morality of self-assertion: is Hedda's suicide a failure or a final act of resistance? Is Rebecca's confession redemptive or self-effacing? His works pose critical questions: What are the costs of subjectivity? Can ethical selfhood exist within oppressive social structures?

VII. Conclusion

Summary of Findings: Henrik Ibsen's later plays depict women navigating the difficult terrain of subjectivity, where internal desire clashes with external social norms. These characters—complex, conflicted, and often tragic—embody the struggle for selfhood amidst repression and resistance.

Contribution to Scholarship: The research reveals how Ibsen's women are not merely literary figures but symbols of broader socio-cultural conflicts about gender, identity, and moral autonomy.

It enriches feminist dramatic theory by focusing on the nuanced, often paradoxical, formation of female subjectivity in his works.

Suggestions for Further Research: A **postmodern reading** of identity in Ibsen's plays could unpack fluidity and fragmentation in selfhood. A **comparative study** with female protagonists in modern global theatre (e.g., works by Caryl Churchill, Ntozake Shange, or Mahesh Dattani) could situate Ibsen within a transnational feminist framework.

Bibliography

1. Aston, E., & Savona, G. (1991). *Theatre as sign-system: A semiotics of text and performance*. Routledge.
2. Beauvoir, S. de. (2009). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949)
3. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge
4. Carlson, M. (2004). *Theories of the theatre: A historical and critical survey, from the Greeks to the present* (Expanded ed.). Cornell University Press.

5. Ferguson, R. (1996). *Henrik Ibsen: A new biography*. Richard Cohen Books.
6. Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (2000). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.
7. Ibsen, H. (1994). *John Gabriel Borkman* (W. Archer, Trans.). Project Gutenberg.
8. Ibsen, H. (1999). *Rosmersholm* (M. Meyer, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
9. Ibsen, H. (2000). *When we dead awaken* (R. Gray, Trans.). Dover Publications.
10. Ibsen, H. (2003). *The lady from the sea* (E. McFarlane, Trans.). Methuen Drama.
11. Ibsen, H. (2005). *Hedda Gabler and other plays* (R. Ferguson, Trans.). Penguin Classics.
12. Irigaray, L. (1985). *This sex which is not one* (C. Porter & C. Burke, Trans.). Cornell University Press.
13. Kristeva, J. (1986). *The Kristeva reader* (T. Moi, Ed.). Columbia University Press.
14. Meyer, M. (1971). *Henrik Ibsen: The making of a dramatist*. Harvard University Press.
15. Moi, T. (2006). *Henrik Ibsen and the birth of modernism: Art, theater, philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
16. Showalter, E. (1985). *The female malady: Women, madness and English culture, 1830–1980*. Virago.
17. Templeton, J. (1997). *Ibsen's women*. Cambridge University Press.