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Revenge in *John Gabriel Borkman*

Md. Sarwar Jahan, M.Phil.



Henrik Ibsen 1828-1906

Point of Departure

The point of departure for my claim is Peter Madsen's "Nature's Revenge: The dialectics of mastering in late Ibsen" where he writes, "the attempt to create the economic preconditions for the development of the natural resources involved repression of natural human attitudes.

In order to raise the treasure of nature he (Borkman) had to strike down on his own inner

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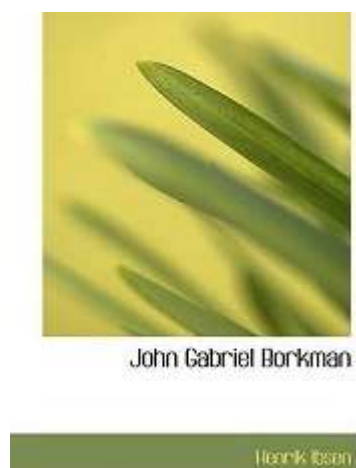
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nature by sacrificing his love to Ella Rentheim. But nature takes its revenge: emptiness invades his life” (Madsen 77). I believe that ‘revenge’ in this play is related with the Renaissance aspirations of the major characters, which is not related to modernity alone. A universal search for glory is also involved here that distorts human relationships. I would show how nature’s revenge is enacted through the motive of revenge working in each character as the basic human relationships break down.

Theoretical Basis and Basic Question

Madsen’s essay would be my theoretical basis; along with it, I would discuss Karen Horney, an American psychiatrist, whose theory on search for glory helps me to take the topic. I will start with the statement where she writes, “the last element in the search of glory, more destructive than the others, is the drive *toward a vindictive triumph*. It may be closely linked up with the drive for actual achievement and success, but if so, its chief aim is to put others to shame or defeat them through one’s very success; or to attain the power, by rising to prominence, to inflict suffering upon them—mostly of a humiliating kind.”(Horney 1950, 26-27) Though her theory is basically meant for the children I would apply it on the adult characters of this play, and ask “Why did they incline towards this vindictive triumph?”

The Characters in Search for Glory



Madsen begins his essay by pointing to a question if Ibsen could be considered a modernist. He sees modernity as how the individual and the collectives experience the process of modernisation and its effects. This process is dependant on cultural and material conditions

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by which an individual subject appropriates a situation. Borkman's search for glory is directly related with the modernization process because his glorious kingdom is established on the reality of the 19th century industrialization of Europe. To achieve his glory Borkman used unlawful means and he was not hesitant or ashamed to cling to dishonesty. He did not have the slightest idea of its consequences, even while talking to his old friend Foldal he judges himself as an extraordinary man and the rest as average people. In the conversation with Foldal he says that it is a curse that they, the "exceptional, chosen people" must bear and as he says: "The common herd- the average man and woman--they do not understand us, Vilhelm." (This and the other quotations from the play are extracted from William Archer's translation accessed at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18792/18792.txt> on 7.5.2009 at 12.30.) This is the symptom of suffering from the superiority complex that makes human beings too rigid and cruel to keep pace with normal humanity. He is preoccupied with dreams, which even restricts his thoughts while talking to his beloved:

Borkman: [without listening to her]: Can you see the smoke from the great steamships out on the fjord?

Ella: No.

Borkman: I can. They come and they go. They carry the spirit of unity all round the world. They shed light and warmth over the souls in many a thousand homes. That was that I dreamt of doing [...] Oh, but all these--they are only like the outworks around the kingdom, I tell you!

Ella: The kingdom, did you say? What kingdom?

Borkman: My kingdom of course! The kingdom I was on the point of conquering when I--when I died.

He left Ella to attain his own glory and she is the victim of his all encompassing vision, but this victimization teaches her to become another Borkman. She starts a new mission that may restore her glory. Ella initially does not make it clear why she comes to stay at Borkman's house but gradually expresses her desire in two different circumstances. To her sister she tells about Erhart that "I want to free him from your power--your will--your despotism" and later while talking to Mr Borkman she claims to win Erhart completely and said "Let Erhart bear my name after me!" By doing so she actually wants to remain alive after her death because

doctors have already told her that she may perhaps last out the winter. This is how she finds meaning in her life and fixes a goal which she in a round about way expresses to her sister. But the things were not so easy because Ella's presence in the house made the atmosphere very tensed; specially Mrs Borkman suspected her of some ill intentions and made it clear in her behaviour. Ella declared her rightful purpose by expressing her love:

Ella. First let me tell you, I think I too have a certain claim upon Erhart. Do you think I haven't?

Mrs. Borkman. [Glancing round the room.] No doubt--after all the money you have spent upon him.

Ella. Oh, not on that account, Gunhild. But because I love him.

Mrs. Borkman. [Smiling scornfully.] Love my son? Is it possible? You? In spite of everything?

Ella. Yes, it is possible--in spite of everything. And it is true. I love Erhart--as much as I can love any one--now--at my time of life.

Her glorious mission is fully exposed to Borkman, and this mission was undertaken as a vengeance against his act.

Ella. Why else should I have taken him to me, and kept him as long as ever I could? Why?

Borkman. I thought it was out of pity, like all the rest that you did.

Ella. [In strong inward emotion.] Pity! Ha, ha! I have never known pity, since you deserted me. I was incapable of feeling it. If a poor starved child came into my kitchen, shivering, and crying, and begging for a morsel of food, I let the servants look to it. I never felt any desire to take the child to myself, to warm it at my own hearth, to have the pleasure of seeing it eat and be satisfied. And yet I was not like that when I was young; that I remember clearly! It is you that have created an empty, barren desert within me--and without me too!

On the other hand, Mrs. Borkman's mission in life has different meaning. Her lost honour is to be restored through that, but this seems to be resentful and bitter. Her moral fight with Ella regarding the son's possession is simultaneously her passion for a glorious life which will also inflict pain and humiliation on Ella although she mentions Borkman in the following conversation:

Mrs. Borkman:[Drawing herself up menacingly.] But I tell you this, Ella, I do not give in yet! I shall redeem myself yet--you may make up your mind to that!

Ella. [Eagerly] Redeem yourself! What do you mean by that?

Mrs. Borkman. Redeem my name, and honour, and fortune! Redeem my ruined life-- that is what I mean! I have some one in reserve; let me tell you--one who will wash away every stain that he has left.

Erhart, too, has his own vision of life. He shares neither the industrialised dominion of Borkman, nor the impassionate restitution of his mother's past glory. His mission is simply 'to live'. He, as a confused young man, takes life in an abstract way, and craves for abstract happiness.

Erhart: [with a sudden glow]: I am young! I want to live, for once in a way, as well as other people! I want to live my own life! [...]

[Passionately.] Yes, but I don't want to work now! For I am young! That's what I never realised before; but now the knowledge is tingling through every vein in my body. I will not work! I will only live, live, live!

He does not explain his idea of living, but he is obviously a lotus-eater, a destitute young man whose psyche has been toyed with many times by the elders in life and that has moulded his intention and understanding of 'living'. First it is the mother who for her goal destroys the mother- son relationship by imposing certain "mission" on him for which Erhart says, "Oh, say rather what you have consecrated my life to. You, you have been my will. You have never given me leave to have any of my own. But now I cannot bear this yoke any longer. I am young; remember that, mother. I cannot consecrate my life to making atonement for another--whoever that other may be."

Victims of the Circumstances?

If we want to reject the idea of revenge completely, which is very unlikely, we have to establish the characters as victims of circumstances. Borkman is neither a victim nor a criminal. His inborn passion for power and wealth is an integral part of modernised Europe that has taught the individual to become self centred and cruel. Madsen compares him with Solness, which is interesting, as both of them share the Renaissance aspirations of growing up to the ultimate. Apart from the protagonist, the other characters in the play are somehow or other vindictive. It stands on the basic idea of revenge. In the play Ibsen has dealt with

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revenge in two different ways, one is explicit and the other is implicit. The latter is related to the subconscious mind of the characters. Long before the actual beginning of the play the first vengeful had already been enacted. In the conversation between Ella and Borkman in the second act this intention of revenge is mentioned.

Borkman. You might perfectly well have been happy with him. And then I should have been saved.

Ella. You?

Borkman. Yes, you would have saved me, Ella.

Ella. How do you mean?

Borkman. He thought I was at the bottom of your obstinacy--of your perpetual refusals. And then he took his revenge. It was so easy for him; he had all my frank, confiding letters in his keeping. He made his own use of them; and then it was all over with me—for the time, that is to say. So you see it is all your doing, Ella!

This someone was none but Borkman's confidant Mr. Hinkel and this revenge is the basis of all other sufferings, downfall and so called 'missions' in the other characters. It is Borkman himself who became the first victim of revenge and he thinks the twin-sisters are, to some extent, responsible for his unrealised dream. It is interesting to observe that he shows different attitudes towards them, with Ella he is sympathetic and emotional but he is arrogant and ruthless towards his wife. He knew it very well that Ella did not do any wrong to him, was not responsible for his downfall; but he accused Mrs Borkman in the court which is evident in her conversation with Ella where Mrs Borkman says, "did he not say in court that it was I who began his ruin? That I spent money so recklessly?" He blames, while talking to Foldal, both the sisters for taking his son Erhart away from him. He says, "I never do any one injustice! Both of them have gone and poisoned his mind against me, I tell you!"

His immediate reaction to them was contradictory. When Ella goes to meet him in his isolated room he says, [Staring at her.] "Who are you? What do you want with me?" He is inquisitive and soft with Ella here but at the end of this act when Mrs Borkman enters he is aggressive and inflicts humiliation by uttering "I allow no one to come up to my room!" And "the worst "powers of evil" are in yourself, Gunhild!"

Could it be logical for Borkman to take revenge against Hinkel and was he in a position to do so? As far as the story goes and the other factors are concerned Borkman was not in a position to do anything against Hinkel because lawfully he was found guilty and that he lost all economic power. Foldal, though in anger, also feels in the same manner and says to Borkman that “You would have to be legally rehabilitated---”. Borkman replied with certain self believe which worked as a dream in the core of his heart and this is where his sense of superiority works as the basis of his revenge.

Though Borkman remained stubbornly faithful in his goal he could not achieve that. If only his mission would be fulfilled he would have got the feeling of winning the battle and satisfy his ego which is evident in the conversation between Borkman and Foldal.

Borkman.[Stopping in front of him.] You are quite right in what you said just now--you have not made any career. But I promise you this, Vilhelm, that when once the hour of my restoration strikes----

Foldal. [Making a movement to rise.] Oh, thanks, thanks!

Borkman. [Waving his hand.] No, please be seated. [With rising excitement.] When the hour of my restoration strikes--when they see that they cannot get on without me--when they come to me, here in the gallery, and crawl to my feet, and beseech me to take the reins of the bank again----! The new bank, that they have founded and can't carry on----[Placing himself beside the writing-table in the same attitude as before, and striking his breast.] Here I shall stand, and receive them!!

Forgetting and completely ignoring his own fault he creates an imaginary situation where he sets himself as a very strong and powerful person, who takes the honour to forgiving them for their fault, and greet them and raise them to his level. Borkman's inner psychology is clearly understandable through his choice of words in the above-mentioned speech.

From the very beginning of the play one can sense that for some unknown reason there is a miscommunication and breach going on between the sisters. In the course of time it becomes clear that the cause of this miscommunication is Borkman. When Ella meets Mrs Borkman in the opening scene the reaction of the latter clearly points to their uneasy past:

Ella (hesitating by the door). You look quite surprised to see me, Gunhild.

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Mrs Borkman(standing stiffly upright between the sofa and the table, steadying the fingertips against the cloth). Aren't you mistaken? The manager of the state lives in the annex, you know.

Mrs Borkman indicates at something unnatural in her sister's motive behind Erhart's upbringing. She asks "but when you set about, all on your own, to bring up Erhart for me— what was your motive in that?" Ella was not ready for the question and she is hesitant to answer and instead of replying she returns the question, "my motive?" She seems to take time to cover up her real feelings here which might bring other unwanted questions. She says that she "came to love him so dearly," but Mrs Borkman is not satisfied with the answer and discards it by saying, "pooh – people situated as we are have something else than happiness to think of." Ella declares to Borkman, "it was the love of my inmost heart for Erhart--and for you too--that made me do it!"

The answer Ella gives here and what she says about her feeling for Erhart afterwards do not conform to the answer she gives to Borkman in their conversation in the second act. Interestingly enough, in the same conversation she accuses Borkman for "killing the capacity to love." She definitely knows it quite clearly that she can not win back her beloved but by winning the heart of Erhart she can get the feeling of winning the battle against her sister.

Ella. Why else should I have taken him to me, and kept him as long as ever I could? Why?

Borkman. I thought it was out of pity, like all the rest that you did.

Ella. [In strong inward emotion.] Pity! Ha, ha! I have never known pity, since you deserted me. I was incapable of feeling it. If a poor starved child came into my kitchen, shivering, and crying, and begging for a morsel of food, I let the servants look to it. I never felt any desire to take the child to myself, to warm it at my own hearth, to have the pleasure of seeing it eat and be satisfied. And yet I was not like that when I was young; that I remember clearly! It is you that have created an empty, barren desert within me--and without me too!

Borkman. Except only for Erhart.

Ella. Yes, except for your son. But I am hardened to every other living thing. You have cheated me of a mother's joy and happiness in life--and of a mother's sorrows and tears as well. And perhaps that is the heaviest part of the loss to me.

Borkman. Do you say that, Ella?

Ella. Who knows? It may be that a mother's sorrows and tears were what I needed most. [With still deeper emotion.] But at that time I could not resign myself to my loss; and that was why I took Erhart to me. I won him entirely. Won his whole, warm, trustful childish heart--until---- oh! (II)

Isn't Ella pointing to compensate her love by winning and taking the control of the 'trusting heart of a child'? Otherwise why would she mention to Mrs Borkman

Ella. Then I will win him back from you! [Hoarsely, half whispering] We two have fought a life-and-death battle before, Gunhild--for a man's soul!.Do you still think that victory was worth the winning?

Mrs. Borkman. [Darkly.] No; Heaven knows you are right there.

Ella. You need look for no victory worth the winning this time either.

Ella who understood Erhart much better than his mother but unfortunately what she did to bring happiness in his life put her under a big question mark. Her notion to liberate Erhart from the grip of his mother was an act of victimising the real mother as ethically Ella does not have the right to possess him.

Ella, unlike Lona Hessel in *Pillars of Society*, operates a dark intention to avenge her defeat. Lona never thought of restoring her name after losing Bernick through taking away Betty's child. The immortal mother in her could forgive Betty and Bernick, and she wanted Bernick to acknowledge his guilt instead of being an agent of pain for him. Ella is more complicated than Lona. It is interesting that when she realises that her sister won't allow Erhart to go with her she seeks for Borkman's help to get back his son though she accused him of abandoning her and killing the ability to love. To her Borkman was a 'criminal'. The irony of the fact is that she seeks help to that criminal who had committed 'the supreme, mortal sin'. Did she then get any positive sign from Borkman to believe that he still loved her or whatever she said was nothing but emotional accusation?

In their conversation Borkman clearly stated what he felt about her when he abandoned her. Joan Templeton calls Borkman "the most ruthless" of Ibsen's last four ambitious men (1997, 291) because he "coolly trades" Ella and betrays Gunhild. Templeton also calls him an egotist as he only takes part peripherally in the conflict between the sisters over the possession of his son. She writes, "Ibsen is less interested in Borkman's abuse of Ella and

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Gunhild, cruel though it was, than in the women's continuing absorption in their victimization. Consumed by Borkman's transgressions against them, they have spent years nursing their injuries" (ibid, 292). But as if to oppose Templeton's aggressive remarks, Borkman utters in the play something in his defence.

Borkman (not looking at her). One doesn't care to take all that's dearest along on a journey like that. [...]

Ella. That I was dearest of all to you?

Borkman. Yes, I have—something of that impression.

Ella is with Borkman to the end, but she cannot forgive Mrs. Borkman. The battle of possessing Erhart started immediately after Borkman's being free from prison. Borkman had "a valid enough excuse" and Mrs Borkman was economically not solvent to look after her son, so it was Ella who took the charge of young Erhart for bringing him up. Ella couldn't accept that nor could she prevent. From then on Mrs Borkman has grown a feeling of distrust against her sister and so when Ella after eight years come to their house to take Erhart to her custody possibly she sensed it and hence showed cool attitude towards Ella at the beginning of the play. In the name of freeing Erhart from his mother's control and domination Ella proposes complete freedom in taking his own decision when his mother asked him not to go to the Hinkel's—"I should like you to feel quite free, Erhart".

In one hand Ella was deprived of love and on the other she was forced to believe that she had been defeated by her sister, which might have made her vindictive. For that reason she took the challenge of winning the heart of Erhart completely because that would be the only possible way to take revenge and satisfy herself. Ibsen with his masterful stroke created the character of Ella. At least we get some positivism in her approach. Comprehending the husband-wife relationship she asked "Could you not make the first movement, then" but Mrs Borkman's self-ego, her incapacity to grasp the whole situation, Borkman's obstinacy and humiliation shown to her made her stick to the blind path of revenge that made the situation more complex.

Moreover, Ella's psychological war against her sister prevented them from showing any rationality. Ella's sympathy and love for Borkman helped her to do something positive for him, to bring hope in his life, to establish him in the normal course of life though she knows that Borkman has done all the wrong against her. Ella even accused him of committing "double murder". It would have been natural if she took some steps against Borkman as he sinned against Ella. But she does not do anything against him rather her desire to win the only child of the family makes Mrs Borkman the ultimate victim, because Erhart is the sole and last mental refuge of her.

Conclusion

Karen Horney writes that human beings have amazing capacity to consider values in a reversed way which works unconsciously. "Thus", she writes, "inconsistency turns into unlimited freedom, blind rebellion against an existing code of morals into being above common prejudice, a taboo on doing anything for oneself into saintly unselfishness, a need to appease into sheer goodness, dependency into love, exploiting others into astuteness. A capacity to assert egocentric claims appears as strength, vindictiveness as justice ...and so on." Most of these qualities are traceable in the characters so far we have brought into discussion. In this way they form a vicious circle, from which there is no apparent or immediate solution. She mentions that these unconscious processes remind her of the Trolls in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, for whom "black looks white, and ugly fair, big looks little, and filthy clean (Horney 94)"

As long as, Horney further writes, "you live in a self-sufficient dream world like *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen says, you can not be true to yourself. Between the two there is no bridge. They are too different in principle to allow for any compromise solution. And if you are not true to yourself, but live an egocentric life of imagined grandeur, then you will play ducks and drakes with your values too."(ibid 94) We see the same situation in *John Gabriel Borkman*. In the name of glory and achievement, fixed by the characters, they act in such an irrational way that completely destroys the base of personal and social relationship without which man's existence crumple down. Unfortunately this can not be understood properly when

human beings are within it because then they create their own sense of judgement which is completely biased and their “human consciousness blinded” (Madsen 73). There is no point of return for the characters from this situation. Ibsen as usual does not predict or suggest any solution in the context as his plays do not profess to indicate how a better state of things could be introduced; he considers himself only a portrait-painter (Sherard 1897). The portraits he paints in *Jon Gabriel Borkman* are certainly some of the most complicated ones who are driven by revenge motive but become the victims of their own passion for glory.

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