

## TRAUMA ULTIMATELY BRINGS ABOUT HEDDA'S DEATH BY VIRTUE OF SOCIETAL CONVENTIONS, HER CONSCIENCE AND ELECTRA COMPLEX

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### **Abstract:**

*"There are wounds that never show on the body that are deeper and more hurtful than anything that bleeds." Laurell K. Hamilton*

*Critics have always argued that Hedda Gabler, one of the most controversial and psychoanalytical plays of Ibsen, is imperceptive and morbid, and its protagonist is un-redeeming and enigmatic. With an endeavour, my research aims at highlighting the Trauma<sup>1</sup> in Hedda Gabler, a play in which trauma ultimately brings about protagonist's death by virtue of societal conventions and her conscience. Although Ibsen is a renowned feminist and psychoanalyst playwright yet there is need to unveil trauma leading to Hedda's suicide. This paper will be based on qualitative research and the framework will be based on textual analysis and critical discourse analysis. With the help of TA, CDA and trauma theory the paper will reveal the hidden ideologies, bothersome and unwanted fears of the character, causing her to be traumatized. Particularly, the play Hedda Gabler by Henrik Ibsen will be a primary text while there will also be different secondary texts such as: articles, research papers, websites, dictionaries and some books which will support this research. Researchers will draw two conclusions from this paper i.e. the first one is broader sense of trauma and the second one is suicide which ultimately happens to be on account of forceful implications of the society. Aim of my research is to justify that Hedda is traumatized by her unending alienation, societal conventions and criticism about being scandalized which ultimately make her commit suicide. Aim of my research is to justify that Hedda is traumatized and compelled to commits suicide by virtue of societal conventions, pressure of people's ruthless criticism and unending alienation.*

*" There is but one truly philosophical problem, and that is suicide." Albert Camus*

The established view of Hedda Gabler sees the play as a study of the frustration and despair engendered in the exceptional individual by a conventionalized society. Hedda Gabler, the protagonist of Henrik Ibsen's drama *Hedda Gabler*, is a complicated woman who decided to end her life by committing suicide. As Ibsen reveals Hedda's story, we learn about conflicts of her life that become more serious and cause her death. Hedda commits suicide because of her inability to conform to social conventions, her boring vicarious life, her upcoming scandal of manipulating Eilert Løvborg to commit suicide beautifully with her pistols. In the very beginning of her marriage life, somehow or the other, Hedda feels very

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<sup>1</sup> trauma is a psychological damage to the mind that occurs as a result of a distressing event.

bad and experiences a trauma which repeatedly occur in her married life. On account of having less narrativization and personal communication, she had inability to overcome and get her trauma healed in the conventionalized society and reoccurrences of more traumatic experiences in her further life.

Diamond (1990) is of the view that on account of problematic situations and mal-adjustment, Hedda Gabler doesn't fit in the society of bourgeoisie as she was coming of an aristocratic family. This was the very reason for what she happened to have a psychological disorder in the form hysteria. "The little moral tale that the play and its commentators provide, that cowardice and lack of an "object" or mission in life accounts for Hedda's boredom and destructiveness, is a Brackian idea (Brack represents the personal bourgeois point of view (Diamond, 1990)." Diamond says that the death is very much inevitable in the play because of the elements causing Hedda to be hysterical entity. "Even Aunt Rina's death can be seen as a mimesis of Hedda's death-grip on the action; Hedda's mourning black in the last act joins the aunt's death to Lövborg's and to Hedda's own demise (Diamond, 1990, p.57)."

Harry Slochower is of the view that welcoming death is not something coward act anyway or doing something with a view to liberate herself from any psychological burden or maculate stigmas of mind. Many people in the world particularly in literature find refuge and solace in death or rather self-inflicted death which, somehow or the other called "free-death". Thus, suicide can be an act of defiance, "a rebellion against death", and a suicide might be venerated as Empedocles was, or admired for having "cheated" death. That self-inflicted death can be viewed as a free act, appears in the German term "Freitod" "free death (Slochower, 1975).

Mary Kay Norseng says and elucidates in the paper "Suicide and Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler" that from the very beginning of the play, Hedda has suicide on her mind. Sigmund Freud also says that man has all the time inclinations towards death, he calls it *Thanatos*. When the drama commences, she acts it out, as deeply depressed people do, bit by bit, as if she were rehearsing a play, or, filling in a sketch already begun, obsessed with images over which she has, paradoxically, all and no control, already in the grip of that nightmare. "Hedda's suicide as accomplishing through her own actions what she has failed to accomplish through Ejlert (Norseng, 1999, p. 6)."

Margot Norris (1976) is of the view that Hedda Gabler marries dull Tesman for security, leaving Lovborg to beget the spiritual "child" with the dull Thea. Hedda's legitimate pregnancy has as little to do with her as her husband's boring treatise on medieval handicrafts, and she therefore destroys the spiritual bastard of Lovborg's brilliant book. Norris of the view that because of leading an aristocratic life Hedda has tendencies towards hypersexualities "Hedda is obsessed by the image of refined debauchery, Lovborg as vine-leaved Bacchus, and by the dangerous gun play which she compulsively repeats throughout the play until she provokes Lovborg to suicide before taking her own life. (p.11)

Kumar Piyush says and is of the view that Hedda Gabler is the victim of poor early training, false ideals, and wrong social adaptation or conventions. It means that the suicide of Hedda, somehow or the other justifiable and it is the society or societal codes and conducts of human beings which make her commit suicide. Hedda seems to be torn between her social self and her essential self. (Piyush, 2017, p. 243) Undermining her husband with her coldness, denying her pregnancy, destroying Thea's life-work, burning Lovborg's creative product, ruining the child-manuscript, and finally, committing suicide are all perverted attempts to satisfy her "craving for life" (Ibsen, 1974, p. 132).

The above research enriches our understanding about trauma and incurable traumatic stigmas on conscience of the protagonist leading her to commit suicide in the play *Hedda Gabler* by Henrik Ibsen. However, these scholars fail to recognize the statement of trauma in *Hedda Gabler*. I aim to gulf this gap by contending this play express the economic condition as the primary stimulus of the trauma. Hedda Gabler does not merely become traumatic due to her poor early training, false ideals, and wrong social adaptation or conventions, she firstly experiences trauma on leaving her father and his house as she had suffering from superiority complex and Electra complex. Ibsen puts in, "She really wants to live the whole life of a man". Owing to her irreversible Electra complex, she had imparted manners more befitting to a boy than a girl. It also reminds of Freud's concept of woman.

As far as the trauma theory is concerned, Caruth explores the ways in which the texts of psychoanalysis, literature, and literary theory both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience. In her book *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth proposes that in the widespread and bewildering experience, trauma in psychoanalytical manner associated with history. This very history may be related to individuals, and group of people. It is quite sure that if the history of individuals or history of group of certain people is

disassociated with catastrophe of havoc, trauma cannot be understood and narrativized. She is of the view that trauma cannot be located but identified while peering through the history of an individual and group of people. Caruth proposes and offers an innovative insight into the inherent connection and link between individual and collective trauma, on the importance of the political and ethical dimensions of the theory of trauma.

In the mid-1990s, research work on trauma were pursued in clinical areas i.e. psychology and neurobiology, and marginally by Holocaust studies. Caruth's critical and contemporary question for the experience of trauma is posed in her introduction: "Is the trauma the encounter with death or the ongoing experience of having survived it?". Caruth approaches this question by analyzing the "double telling," a fluctuation between a "crisis of death" and "the correlative crisis of life". Furthermore, Caruth argues, "traumas stubbornly persist in bearing witness to some forgotten wound" in the absence of an immediate understanding of the traumatic experience. For this, she interprets explicit references to traumatic experience, but she also traces the recurrent words and key figures of "departure," "falling," "burning," or "awakening."

Sigmund Freud also managed to ponder upon the trauma and traumatic experience after the atrocities and obliteration of World Wars. Firstly, he was talking and remained exceptionally engaged with 'pleasure principles' but after he expressed trauma that it is an experience which is repeated compulsively, divides the psyche, influence memory differently than other experiences. This is unable to be experienced initially but in a narrative production of the past --- are key ideas informing the first development in trauma studies scholarship that addresses the theory of trauma and the ways trauma influences memory and identity. This very experience is of excess which overwhelms the subject symbolically and physically and is not accessible.

The fact of transference points to an important fact about the nature of trauma: the compulsion of the human psyche to repeat traumatic events over and over again (hence the term "repetition-compulsion"). This was a difficult point for Freud to make sense of. Since it would seem that both the pleasure-principle and the reality-principle would logically demand the forgetting of painful events, since both principles are ultimately committed to gratification. The reality-principle certainly and merely allows for some delay or a modicum of pain to ensure our gratification which will happen in the face of real obstacles. In dealing

with patients suffering trauma from the ravages and effects of World War I, Freud also felt the need to point to some principle that was far removed from sexuality.

Thus, Freud resultantly wrote and framed an important work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he theorized that the human psyche is driven by two major instinctual drives: the first one is *Eros*<sup>2</sup> or the sexual instincts, which he later saw as compatible with the self-preservative instincts; and the second is *Thanatos*<sup>3</sup> or the death-instinct, a natural desire to “re-establish a state of things that was disturbed by the emergence of life”. In other words, whereas one part of the human psyche is seeking gratification, another part is geared to seek a return to the quiet of non-existence: the “death-instinct.” This concept of the "death-instinct" or "death-drive" allowed Freud to make sense of the human tendency towards destruction, including sometimes self-destruction.

In *Hedda Gabler* Trauma is which much apparent as we see that the protagonist had painful experience which is subject to be forcefully relocated into her subconscious. The trauma or traumatic experience first happened to take place when she had to leave her luxurious and military lifestyle and join a bourgeois lifestyle and family. The cause of her very trauma was due to having Electra complex and strict fixation with her previous lifestyle. Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* writes and is also of the view that trauma in psychoanalytical manner is associated with history. If viewed contextually, Hedda is also very much associated with her past unconsciously and unknowingly that is how she, having trauma in her subconsciousness, keeps experiencing traumatic experiences throughout the play.

Further, it can be seen that Cathy Caruth is of the view that trauma cannot be located but identified while peering through the history of an individual and group of people. A reader cannot know that Hedda is a traumatic character if he or she generally reads the text for the sake of reading if the reader analyzes the character of the protagonist psychoanalytically and neurologically, he or she will definitely be acquainted with the trauma of Hedda, its cause and different traumatic experiences leading to her death. I claim that Hedda’s trauma can be identified when we see her over fixation with the things associated with her past life and or

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<sup>2</sup> Greek Mythology The god of love, son of Aphrodite. often *eros* Creative, often sexual yearning, love, or desire: “The new playful *eros* means that impulses and modes from other spheres enter the relations between men and women”.

<sup>3</sup> In Greek mythology, Thanatos means "Death" or personification of death.

with her father i.e. the pistols of her father, piano, her father's portrait, Hedda's name Hedda Gabler instead of Hedda Tesman. These are the examples with which it can be branded protagonist to be a traumatic character.

If viewed the character of Hedda Gabler in the light of trauma theory of Caruth, a point comes into limelight that the words "departure," "falling," "burning," or "awakening" inevitability interlinked with trauma because many people experience trauma on account of "departure," "falling," "burning," or "awakening, death and separation. Similarly, Hedda Gabler also had irreparable trauma due to her departure from her father's house and separation from her previous life. Hedda's trauma really proved to be "forgotten wound" because she could not get it heal or narrativize it in one way or other. Thus, on account of this trauma, she had many traumatic experiences which ultimately cause her death at the end of the play.

While dealing with traumatology, Freud expressed that trauma is an experience which is repeated compulsively, divides the psyche, influence memory differently than other experiences. In the same manner, Hedda Gabler had a burdensome memory in her subconsciousness. Furthermore, it can be said that according to Freud's concept of death, *Thanatos* or the death-instinct, is a natural desire to "re-establish a state of things that was disturbed by the emergence of life". If viewed Freud's concept of death in the light of Hedda's character, I emphatically say that though Hedda was committed suicide and killed herself natural desire to "re-establish a state yet it can be asserted with emphasis that she took the chalice of death on account of her trauma and traumatic experience.

I strongly agree with Elin Diamond that Hedda has a lot of maladjustments in the family of bourgeoisie because she came from an aristocratic family. Although she is from an aristocratic family, she cannot be inherited from her father due to the patriarchal society's rule. Therefore, she has to marry George Tesman who can provide her with security. By the way, Tesman's family is not rich enough to provide her with luxuries that she once had in past. This is how the protagonist started to be traumatized because of leaving her luxurious life and inheritance behind. The title of play reveals that owing to her exceptional father-fixations and Electra-complex<sup>4</sup>, she calls herself to be Hedda Gabler rather than Hedda Tesman. Furthermore, it can be penned down and mentioned that she keeps playing with her father's revolvers. Hence it is asserted that the parting and detachment of her father

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<sup>4</sup> Electra complex is a term used for girl and her father for special attraction like Oedipus Complex .



traumatizes her firstly in the play. Hence it can be said here that because of her over fixation with her father, Hedda is traumatized, missing all she had in past. When she parts and leaves her father along with the aristocratic living stile style, she is psychologically hurt.

Furthermore, it can be seen that the action of the play is presided over by the portrait of Hedda's father, General Gabler, which now hangs in the Tesmans' drawing room. This portrait of Hedda's dead father serves as the symbol of a moribund military-aristocratic world which no longer offers his daughter a home. This very portrait of her father does not let her get rid of that trauma. Somehow it was the reminder of her previous life which was full of aristocratic merrymakings and luxuries. Hence this very reminder proves to be a hitting her trauma time and again which ultimately becomes the cause of her suicidal demise. I claim that parting and detachment from her father caused Hedda her to be traumatized as she very much fixated with her father.

I am of the view that she feels suffocated in her claustrophobically middle-class atmosphere. Hedda's death is also due to her boring vicarious life. I agree with Mary Kay Norseng as he says that in the very beginning of the play Hedda Seems to be maladjusted and bad-tempered. Later we know from the text, boredom is the major essence of her life. She is unhappy with her marriage life; she never loves her husband, Tesman. She is trapped in a boring life because she prefers financial security to authentic happiness. Hedda decides to live vicariously through Lovborg's life. She manipulates Lovborg to live what she wants to do. It seems she can conceive of no future for herself other than a life of excruciating boredom. During the opening scenes of the play various hints are thrown out to suggest that Hedda is pregnant, but the prospect of motherhood is so far from providing her with a reason for living that it seems to be anathema to her. Hedda's trauma becomes severer and deeper therefore she would certainly bear the child in an unpromising environment.

Hedda's complex feelings about the relationship between Thea and Løvborg fuel the action of the play. Hedda is very much jealous of Thea or Mrs Elvested because the latter was very productive. The consequence is that Lovborg lost the manuscript, which by this time had acquired an intense emotional value for all concerned – he and Thea had come to think of it, in fact, as a child. When the manuscript comes into Hedda's possession, via Tesman (who found it by the roadside), she burns it. Having burnt the manuscript, Hedda realized that she had done really something wrong like murdering someone or baby. Even though, while burning it she utters “Thea I am burning your child.” Hence it can be asserted that her

conscience knew that she was doing it therefore having been stricken by the compunction or prick of conscience she happened to commit suicide. Kumar Piyush said right that it because of the false training and upbringing that Hedda lacked in the elements of coexistence.

When the distraught Løvborg (who knows only that he has lost the child) returns to her house, she encourages his thoughts of suicide - and puts into his hands one of her father's pistols.

LØVBORG:

*[Clenches his hands.]* Oh, why did you not carry out your threat? Why did you not shoot me down?

HEDDA

Because I have such a dread of scandal. (60, Ibsen)

LOVBORG LOVBORG:

I will only try to make an end of it all—the sooner the better.

HEDDA GABLER:

*[A step nearer him.]* Eilert Lovborg—listen to me. —Will you not try to—to do it beautifully? (Ibsen, 1974, p. 116 )

Complications unfold when we learn that Hedda herself has had an earlier relationship with Løvborg, which broke up when she threatened to shoot him. It seems that she did so because, for her, Løvborg had in some undisclosed fashion begun to ask too much of the relationship. This is also one of prospective that Hedda manipulated Lovborg because he had some illegitimate relation, and she was afraid that he might unlock any fact about her. When Løvborg makes his way back to the rooms of 'Mademoiselle Diana', where he believes the manuscript was stolen from him, and in an unruly scene (reported to Hedda by Judge Brack) the pistol goes off and Løvborg is killed. After hearing the news about his death, she flabbergasted and had sever prick of conscience which resultantly caused her commit suicide.

After the death of Lovborg, Brack attempts to use these circumstances to play upon Hedda's fear of scandal and so to blackmail her into a liaison. But in the dénouement, while Thea and Tesman are beginning to try to reconstruct Løvborg's manuscript from the notes which Thea kept, Hedda shoots herself. Reputation is far more important than human life in Hedda Gabler, as we will see many more times in the act that follows. Hence it can be asserted that the trauma, caused by the fear of scandal and prick of conscience, proves to be



irreparable and incurable. When Hedda comes to know about the proven fact, she could not help committing suicide because she knew that she would not be able to face society after it.

In *Hedda Gabler*, by depicting the frustrated journey of a woman whose search for her own identity finds no support or solace in a hostile bourgeoisie environment, Ibsen declares his most vigorous protest against the bourgeois society which compels Hedda commit suicide on account of its conventions. Somehow or the other, the play is made up of the existential endeavour for selfhood; and Hedda Gabler reflects how cruel and tragic this struggle can be for a woman in our society. In my view, Hedda Gabler became traumatic due to the society and her own over fixation to her father which make her commit suicide by virtue of societal conventions and pricking of her conscience after the death of Løvborg. As we know Ibsen inherited what had become a highly conventionalized dramatic tradition. Hedda's conduct was not very merciful or productive. In every way, she is deprived of womanly exquisite traits because She loves to hurt others and rather enjoys such hideous acts. This very enjoyment leaves a stigma in her conscience which causes her self-inflicted death. Hence, it is to justified and seems to be proven that Hedda's trauma is brought about on account of her excessive and inordinate Electra complex which ultimately impelled her to commit suicide by virtue of its non-healing nature.

Societal conventions, pressure of people's ruthless criticism and unending alienation or monotony in bourgeoisie family make had experience the same trauma first brought about after her marriage. Hedda could not be narrativized her trauma that is how she could not overcome her trauma and kept experiencing it time and again during her earthly sojourn. Her irreparable frustration and irretrievable despair became more vicious and deadly as the conventionalized society added a lot to the protagonist's traumatic experiences. In the light of trauma theory, Caruth has raised a question in her book *Unclaimed Experience*, "Is the trauma the encounter with death or the ongoing experience of having survived it? It can be said that Trauma is name of an encounter with death of some very near and dear. Sometimes it is more traumatic for the people who survives from any tragic incident i.e. 9/11, Pashawar Tragdy, WWI or WWII. Similarly, Hedda Gabler is not a character who had trauma due to death of someone rather she had trauma due to her excessive and inordinate Electra complex and separation from her militarily luxurious life. Due to this very trauma, she had many other traumatic experiences which ultimately caused her death.

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