

# The Differential and Indifferential Identities in Henrik Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper investigates the differential and indifferential identities of the individuals, in the limited society in which the individuals imagine being free in spite of accepting the traditions, and customary laws and ways, in Henrik Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*. This study can be acquainted with Edward Said's and Friedrich Nietzsche's theories of exile and cultural identity. For Said, exile is self-exile, and for Nietzsche, cultural identity means to grasp the superiority which is self-realization and self-understanding, and to be mature by shaping a new feature. The main aim in this paper is to portray the feature of intellectual individuals searching for freedom; this freedom is consciousness of self and the result of self-exile because the individuals adapt themselves to exile from the other people and their society. The individuals change their views, thoughts, and behaviors, leave all imposed obligations of any sort, and reject the traditions and limitations of society to be alienated from the others around them. They understand the realities of life by losing all boundaries. Another point is to represent the life of individuals who are not able to transform their situations; it means that these individuals adapt themselves to all social conventions and laws governed the society. They take a form of unity very satisfactorily. Thus, releasing the individuals from the traditional values of society produces differential identity of individuals, and accepting the ancient values of the society in order to be free creates indifferential identity for individuals.

**Keywords:** Self-exile, Freedom, Self-realization, Cultural Identity, Differential Identity, Indifferential Identity.

## INTRODUCTION

Henrik Johan Ibsen is a major nineteenth century Norwegian playwright. He is one of the very greatest names in world literature, and he is a central figure in the modern break-through in the intellectual life of Europe. C. D. Merriman notes that Ibsen is referred to as "the father of prose drama" (1) and is one of the founders of Modernism in the theatre and across public life. He is often ranked as one of the great playwrights in the European tradition. Richard Hornby describes him as "a profound poetic dramatist—the best since [William] Shakespeare" (qtd. in Merriman, 2). Ibsen is the most frequently performed dramatist in the world after Shakespeare or second only to Shakespeare. He gives a new vitality to theatrical art by bringing into European bourgeois drama an ethical gravity, a psychological depth, and a social significance which the theatre has lacked since the days of Shakespeare.

Ibsen's work examines the realities which lay behind many facades. In fact, one of the characteristics of his works "is to look at the world and to understand it as a unique reality" (qtd. in Baradaran Jamili, 289). It utilizes a critical eye and free inquiry into the conditions of life and issues of mortality. Ibsen's clear background has a strong influence on his work. In his plays, the characters mirror his parents, and his themes deal with issues of financial difficulty as well as moral conflicts stemming from dark secrets hidden from society. As Ibsen grows older, he has trouble accepting certain forms of liberalism which overemphasizes the individual's sovereign right to self-realization and to some extent radically departed from past norms and values. In his works, he points out the dangers of radicalism built on individual's moral norms. The background of the young Ibsen gives him a sharp eye

for social forces and conflicts arising from differing viewpoints. It can help him to observe and to judge the experiences of his life “that actually suspends his identity and allows himself to enjoy a new form of cultural or social understanding” (ibid, 288). In small societies, such as typical Norwegian coastal town, these social and ideological conflicts are more exposed than they are in a large city. Ibsen’s first painful experiences come from such a small community. He sees how conventions, traditions, and norms exercise a negative control over the individual, create anxiety, and inhibit a natural and joyful lifestyle. This is the atmosphere which forms the basis for his writing and world fame.

What Ibsen has earlier treated as a national problem of identity now becomes a question of the individual’s personal integrity. The individual has to follow the path of volition in order to achieve true humanity, this is the only way to real freedom for the individual, and it follows, for society as a whole, in which Ibsen characterizes himself more than anything else as an individual and a dramatist. His independent position in what he calls “the great, free, cultural situation” provides him with the broad perspective of distance, and freedom (Merriman, 23). Ibsen sees himself to be in the exile, which is called self-exile. He lives in self-exile, and exiles himself from the people around and from the society; he chooses to move beyond the traditions, laws, and limitations of society. Thus, a primary value for Ibsen is freedom, which, as he believes, is essential for self-fulfillment.

*When We Dead Awaken* (abbreviated *WWDA*) is the last play which is written by Henrik Ibsen in 1899, in Norwegian. This contemporary play draws on *The Pillars of Society* (1877), and addresses central theme of modern society, which is freedom. Ibsen calls it a “dramatic epilogue” (qtd. in Merriman, 11). It is also destined to be the epilogue of his life’s work, because illness prevents him from writing more. It belongs to one of the periods of Ibsen’s productive life, which is the realm of the spirit; and the action illustrates some effort at self-realization. The play, *When We Dead Awaken*, is characterized as artistic confessions in the name of self-scrutiny and self-awareness. In the play, everything has been sacrificed for art, and this art serves as a prison from which the artist can neither escape nor wish to escape, which refers to man’s self-imposed exile. In *When We Dead Awaken*, it is proved that old values and previous conceptions are adrift. The movement shakes up the life of individual and jeopardizes the established social order. Therefore there is a need for change or metamorphosis; i.e. something is springing forth from the individual’s volition. Baradaran Jamili asserts that such a “transformation is produced both by providing the external factors that may change the identity of the individuals, and by stimulating the internal factors that may lead the individuals to an internal journey” (289). However, the outstanding points of Ibsen’s human portrayal are his characters’ conceptions of what makes life worth living, their values and their self-understanding. In the play, the individual intellectually frees himself from traditional ways of thinking, and it means that he has a real chance of finding the freedom and independence which he is seeking.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The pattern of traditional domination developed in societies to command at top by a powerfully centralizing culture is nowadays essentially unstable. Through a philosophical and cultural discourse, each society crams with unarmed civilian populations, who endure the imposed deprivations, boundaries, and inflexibility of governments which have ruled them for too long. Intellectually and ethnically, in the new postmodernist, post-colonialist society, large masses of people want to eat, move, talk, sing, and dress better than before, for the old systems cannot respond to those demands. Then, they decide to change everything which is depended upon the ancient principal and custom, and it easily seems that no one appeals to traditions, as they become free from the traditional society and the ancient views and thought. Moreover, such individuals, who accept the cultural shifts, do not simply request for the traditional identities, they create a restored identity through the cultural system of education and the inculcation of new authority.

The interests of a person, who cannot represent himself, move from confinement to freedom, such a freedom “is consciousness of self, not the closing of door to communication but a never-ending process of discovery and encouragement that is leading to self-exile” (Said, 1993: 274). Such a person is someone who takes up the struggle for human freedom, he appropriates the principles as a human who is free and whose life ends terribly. The freedom as an intellectual mission is born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements, Said notes that the “past life of exiles is annulled. Why? Because anything that is not reified ceases to exist” (ibid, 333). The society, where it abrogates the results of the election as well as most free activities, causes the person not to appeal to the past and to get orthodoxy for his authority. It appears tired of the logic which reduces the person and segregates him from an unregenerate essence. Said believes that “the people themselves must realize that they must decide to wake up and shake themselves, use their brains, and stop playing the stupid faun of the Sleeping Beauty” (ibid, 269). This achievement is to enact the birth of an independent movement, “man is compelled to be

always in motion. Man is a 'choice', a struggle. He is an infinite migration, a migration within himself; he is a migrant within his own soul" (ibid, 334).

Said insists that "the achievements of any exile are permanently undermined by his or her sense of loss" (1984: 49). He, in a different context, continues, "Modern exile is irremediably secular and unbearably historical. It is produced by human beings for other human beings; it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography" (ibid, 50). Michael Seidel (1956- ) asserts that this dimension of exile is characterized as "a metaphor for the alienated or marginalized modern consciousness, whereby individuals are alienated not only from the place they inhabit but also from the things they do or the things they are" (2). Consequently, in exile, the individual may lose his traditions, he loses everything which belongs to the individual's past, such as his traditional views, thought, value, and even identity, and the individual grasps to become the alien and different individual in his country, society, or even family. But the person, who accepts to be in self-imposed exile, is an individual investigating to answer the questions of identity and to find who he is.

Identity can be defined as a challenge between the personal and traditional morality. It is represented as the enhancement of individual and cultural health in life, creativity, and power. Identity, for every individual, is the idea of "life-affirmation," (qtd. in Kaufmann and Hollingdale, 279) which involves an honest questioning of all doctrines that drain life's expansive energies. Identity is marked by difference and the ways in which the individual distinguishes between himself and the others, as the differences related to ethnicity and disability. The greatest difference arises from forms of cultural identity—new and old—that the individual attempts to secure his identity by accepting to change his identity and by trying to live with difference.

Identity proceeds from the belief that the people can form features, which not only designate the essence of a thing but comprehend it. In fact, it is to affirm the importance of the things created by the people. As the transformation of identity is an "attempt to understand the actual world by means of a scheme of being posited by ourselves," (Nietzsche, 1968: 53) to understand is a broad function which assumes the prior existence of an entity to be known, it receives qualities and signs—which belong to a person or a thing—from the entity by merely allowing it to be what it is. The change of cultural identity is considered as a position for the individuals through which they decide not to be equal with the others, but they rather desire to grow, to be modern and unique, and separate themselves from the people and the society in order to exile themselves, because they want to prove the freedom and perfection of their selves, in Nietzsche's idea, every free individual shows "what he is" (qtd. in Kaufmann and Hollingdale, 1). The intellectual must attempt to attain the superiority or the power, which is self-realization or self-understanding; he has to become mature by creating a new identity for himself.

Nietzsche notes that exceptional people shall follow their own "inner law," as his favorite motto is "Become what you are" (ibid, 5). He asserts that the "goal of life should be to find yourself," many people want to learn more about themselves in order to make themselves a better person; i.e. they want to know much about themselves (ibid, 3). Nietzsche believes that the individuals create the self through their experiences and actions, and in order to be a complete self, they must accept everything which they have done. Nietzsche argues that such people like to become those they are, it means "human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, [and] who create themselves" (ibid, 4). The new postmodern world owes all its improvement to such individuals.

### **Saidian Exile in Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken***

The intellectual individual, who finds himself as a perfect man, according to Said, wishes "to transcend the restraints of provincial limits," he must have the independence and detachment of someone or society to derive satisfaction and be full of certainty about "who 'he' is" (1993: 335, 336). Moreover, the people must know that only human beings can make their own cultures and identities. In the following lines, Ibsen refers to the individual's independence and satisfaction by going beyond the limitations in the traditional society:

Irene

(*Smiling and shaking her head.*) The young woman of your Resurrection Day can see all life lying on its bier.

Professor Rubek

(*Throwing his arms violently around her.*) Then let two of the dead—us two—for once live life to its uttermost—before we go down to our graves again! [...]

Professor Rubek

But not here in the half darkness! Not here with this hideous dank shroud flapping around us—

Irene

(*Carried away by passion.*) No, no—up in the light, and in all the glittering glory!

Up to the Peak of Promise! [...] (*Proudly.*) The sun may freely look on us, Arnold.

[...]

Professor Rubek

(*Drawing her along with him.*) We must first pass through the mists. (*WWDA Act III, 99-100*)

The intellectual individuals, who have to transform themselves to gain freedom and satisfaction in their lives, are Rubek and Irene. These characters decide to be far away from the traditions and conventions, and from the traditional life, which is dark and stable, in such an old society. In fact, the characters look at the society as a grave and look at its conventions as bier; by accepting self-exile, the intellectuals, such as Rubek and Irene, choose to release themselves from such a kind of grave and such a kind of bier. The sentence, “[w]e must first pass through the mists,” demonstrates that they want to achieve independence and detachment by breaking the enforced boundaries and forces in the society, they get a new life in the light and glory, and they freely achieve the highest point of life which shines in the glory and freedom. The characters, such as Rubek and Irene, as the exiles, who decide to be perfect and strong, kill themselves, indeed they kill their traditional personalities, because they want to go beyond the restraints of the society, and show their resistance and opposition to the confinements in the limited society. Thus, in such a different society, they show and prove themselves as the individuals who have been transformed by being born in the self-imposed exile.

Appeals to the past are the commonest strategies in interpreting of cultural identity. Said asserts that “what animates such appeals is not only agreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, or whether it continues” (1993: 3). Some people seem to appeal to the traditions and conventions of those societies, in which they live; in fact, they cannot be a perfect individual. Hence, such people might not accept different cultural identities; they formulate an indifferential or stable identity. As Ibsen writes:

Maia

(*Eludes him. And measures him with a glance.*) Do you know what you look like, Mr.

Ulfheim?

Ulfheim

I should think I'm probably most like myself.

Maia

Yes, there you're exactly right. For you're the living image of a faun. [...]

Ulfheim

A faun! Isn't that a sort of monster? Or a kind of a wood demon, as you might call it?

Maia

Yes, just the sort of creature you are. A thing with a goat's head and goat-legs. Yes, and the faun has horns too! (*WWDA Act III, 84-5*)

The passage shows that Ulfheim is an individual who adapts himself to the conventions. He accepts to live in the past, which is uncertain. The sentence “Yes, just the sort of creature you are” shows that he acts and behaves like an animal, Ulfheim takes the traditions, as he is not able to leave them, and tries to change himself, his thought and behavior to become an intellectual. As far as Ulfheim is not a perfect man, he easily accepts to appeal to the customs of the ancient society. He is not a different individual; he has not different identity, for he is in unity with the conventions and the people around him.

### ***Nietzschean Identity in Ibsen's When We Dead Awaken***

The differential and indifferential identities of the individuals are because of the limitations of society. The character's identity changes by leaving the limited society and accepting to exile himself spiritually from his home, society, and even world, for he wants to have real freedom. Based on Nietzsche's view, the intellectual person “challenges himself and the others' selves, and does not live passively” (qtd. in Kaufmann and Hollingdale, 3). Moreover, not only is it the will to have a powerful being or self, which rejects the past life, but also it is a continual motion of cultural identity. In this regard, Ibsen writes:

Professor Rubek

(*Continuing undisturbed.*) I lived at such high speed, Maia. We live so, we artists. [...] I have come to realise[sic] that I am not at all adapted for seeking happiness in indolent enjoyment. Life does shape itself that way for me and those like me. I must go on working—producing one work after another—right up to my dying day. (*Forcing himself to continue.*) That is why I cannot get on with you any longer, Maia—not with you alone.

Maia

(*Quietly.*) Does that mean, in plain language, that you have grown tired of me?

Professor Rubek

(*Bursts forth.*) Yes, that is what it means! I have grown tired—intolerably tired and fretted unstrung—in this life with you! Now you know it. [...] It is simply and solely I myself, who have once more undergone a revolution—

(*Half to himself*)—and awakening to my real life. (*WWDA Act II, 57*)

Rubek, as an intellectual individual, changes his thought, identity, and lifestyle by struggling with himself. He turns his noble opportunity and his power into a powerful and better situation, for his view will be expanded. As the character's work stirs him to his noblest endeavor; Rubek says, "I must go on working—producing one work after another" when he finishes his work, he creates another work, and he stirs with the next work. The intellectual artist debases his art, because he regards this art as an end in itself, as he considers his life as an end in itself. He claims, "[i]t is simply and solely I myself, who have once more undergone a revolution and awakening to my real life"; in fact, the character accepts a revolution in his life to have a real life, he understands his self and his being, he attains the maturity and feels his power on his art, thought, identity, and the way of his life. By such a change and power, he is able to leave his past or old work and not to be in harmony with the traditional individuals, such as Maia and Ulfheim, who have the mummified identities and remain in conformity with each other, and adapt themselves to the old conventions and bonds—which are governed by the closed society—without having any option, they forget themselves and their life in order to be under the influence and control of the society while they are not satisfied from this kind of indifferential cultural identity or life.

Exile means someone takes up the struggle for human freedom—a struggle is also going on for the sake of discovering one's identity. Those, who cannot represent themselves, do not move from the confinement to the freedom, they appear to be loyal in the dominant society, they are silent, and this silence is the result of the absence of knowledge, no one has anything to say, even if, he is aware of the fact that this is an unpleasant limited view. Such indifferential people lose their original authority; their appeal to the past might be the result of their free-will, which means to accept the traditional customs. Nietzsche notes that the person's identity seems to be a "passive mode" which "is coordinated with the values of low" (1967:36). The person forgets himself and his independence in the limited society not to be a perfect individual; as he will be in harmony with the traditional people. It forms a monotonous indifferential identity. In contrast, a perfect man, who has a different cultural identity, is free from the traditional views and thoughts, and the traditional society. In *When We Dead Awaken*, Ibsen refers to the differential and indifferential identities of the people:

Ulfheim

(*With suppressed exasperation.*) I once took a young girl—lifted her up from the Mire of the streets and carried her in my arms. Next my heart I carried her. So I would have borne her all through life. [...]

Maia

(*With a toss of the head.*) Took her up with him finely, you may be sure! Oh no! he beguiled her into a cold, clammy cage, where—as it seemed to her there was neither sunlight nor fresh air, but only gilding and great petrified ghosts of people all around the walls. (*WWDA Act III, 88-9*)

Ulfheim is a traditional man who lives, thinks, and behaves in the old way. He cannot be a real intellectual man, because he is an indifferential character who is dependent on the traditional views. Ulfheim's claims show that the individual lives in the purblind condition, he is merely continuous with the old gilding of society. For him, the woman, as a means, has just a partial role and value. He cannot adapt himself to the change, however, such a character accepts to exile himself from the society. By taking up to the high mountain, the individual does not leave the traditions and conventions. Ulfheim is loyal in his dominant society, where no one is aware of its limitations. Therefore there occurs no changeability in the character, because he cannot change his self and his path of life to show really what he is. In this sense, he finds himself as a person mummified in his indifferential cultural identity.

In *When We Dead Awaken*, there is another example to demonstrate the indifferential characters in spite of the fact that they adapt themselves to the traditions:

Ulfheim

Oh, two people can doze away a summer night in there comfortably enough. Or a whole summer, if it comes to that!

Maia

[...] Now I am going down to the hotel—before awaken down there. (*WWDA Act III, 86*)

Maia is a traditional individual who makes a strong request for her past. She cannot reject it, for she agrees with the social traditions and conventions; hence, her appeal to the traditional and limited society proves that she is not a perfect individual. Maia, as a prisoner who is confined in the old society, is unable to change her identity and her lifestyle. She remains in past, which is dark and stable. Maia is not finally a different character; she has not a noticeable life with a different identity and is imprisoned in her indifferential cultural identity.

## CONCLUSION

This study proves a subject of investigation of life in traditional society by gathering 'truth' of every feeling, lifestyle, and collective behavior. The changeable nature of some persons' thoughts is from the crisis of the cultural identity to the changeable role of intellectuals in a society, where everything is elusive, and where the anguish, pain, and insecurity are caused by living in society, and how individuals are placed within it. Finding the truth 'who he is' shapes this sense that merely the individual believes that he can be someone other than he is, and it depends upon the individual himself and what he chooses; the individual decides to have every kind of life with every kind of identity. The identity, which is either mummified or metamorphosed, determines his different personality and lifestyle. To choose an identity means to change the identity and the effect of this changeable identity is an accelerated fragmentation of social laws and traditions, and the only reason of this idea is to have the good society and the better world.

Having a particular lifestyle means to cut out the life, which is stable, and the mummified identity, in order to accept the enjoyment of exile, as self-imposed exile, refers to the individual's stable birth. In contrast, the change of identity occurs because of accepting to exile from other people—family, wife, child, and friend—and to exile from traditional norms of society. It gives a power to the individual to have the control over his life, thought, behavior, views, and activities, as it will be a reason why he does not appeal to his traditional identity and his past life, which is easily broken.

Actually, those who can compose and decompose their identities more or less at will manage to get rid of the constraints enforced and imposed on them by the society, because the limitations and the old values of society have lost their pleasures and values. Hence, the intellectual individuals do not trust the old services or laws; they rely on their own wits and skills and cannot achieve essential and enough salvation from such a society. They alienate themselves from the other people, who accept a silence against the social codes, norms, and limitations, to exile and live in themselves in order to have a different identity. Ibsen very artistically and meticulously portrays such groups of people in his *When We Dead Awaken* to show that even a few groups of modern men despite getting knowledge are loyal to the conventions of past but some others search to match themselves with the modern multicultural discourses.

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