Nora and Hedda in Malaysian Theatre

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Preface

The first Western modern play that I was exposed to was written by Henrick Ibsen (1828-1906). As a Malaysian drama scholar, I choose to read his plays over other playwrights because he is known as “the father of modern drama” and wrote his plays a century ago, while the first modern Malay play was written in 1960.

I read most of Ibsen’s plays and found myself attracted to his woman protagonists, particularly A Doll House (1879) and Hedda Gabler (1890). I was shocked by both protagonists’ final act in these plays - Nora abandoning her husband and Hedda committing suicide. Besides, both plays also dealt with important gender-related issues. My interest towards Ibsen’s writings grew as I learned more about the impact both these plays had created on its audiences, especially concerning women’s issues -- on Western societies at the end of the nineteenth century.

Repeatedly the question that I asked myself was: “If both plays shocked their Western audiences over a hundred years ago, yet were accepted as important pieces of literature in the Western world, what would they do to Malaysian audiences in the Eastern World”? My initial interest and curiosity then led me into analyzing these plays. I wanted to know whether the Malaysian audiences can find resonance in these female protagonists that Ibsen had created. This book therefore, presents analysis of both, Nora and Hedda, from an Islamic point of view in order to stage these plays to a Malaysian theatre audience.
Chapter 1

Introduction

Until today only one play by Ibsen has been presented to the Malaysian audience. The *Wild Duck* (1884) was translated into the Malay language and called *Itik Liar* (direct translation). It was directed by Ahmad Tarmimi Saregar and was produced on August 1994 in Kuala Lumpur. This play did not succeed with the Malaysian audience, nor received many good reviews. The Malaysian Theatre Council (TEMA), pointed out that *Itik Liar* could not be appreciated by Malaysian audience because it failed to present issues that were relevant to the Malaysian society1.

Malaysia is a fast-growing country and its nation is expected to contribute productively in its economic growth. Malaysians are expected to move forward in all aspects. But *Itik Liar*’s theme -- that of a man drowned in illusion – was found to be irrelevant by most theatre critics. Malay theatre critics felt that the director showed insensitivity in presenting a play with no resonance to the country’s needs. They also claimed that plays that portrayed individuals who live in a world of illusion and do not progress,

are not relevant to the Malaysian audiences.

I believe that, unlike Itik Liar, A Doll House (1879) and Hedda Gabler (1890) do indeed have relevance to the Malay audiences. Not only audience can find resonance in both these women-centered plays, they also indirectly reinforce the need for the Malay society to follow religious teaching in order to maintain a harmonious family environment.

In undertaking this research, I will determine how a Malaysian audience is able to relate to Nora and Hedda. As a director I study both plays applying Islamic perspective on its women protagonists with the intention to stage “A Doll House” and “Hedda Gabler”. My intention is to decide whether Nora and Hedda could be accepted by Malaysian women, in particular the Muslim community. My findings will determine which or both of these plays should be or could be presented to Malay audiences.

Feminity in the Western and Malaysian Context

It is also necessary that I define the terms feminine and masculine that will be widely used in this analysis. Western assignments of feminine and masculine traits are similar to those of the Malay society. Traditional masculinity is defined as being strong, brave, a provider, an intellectual, and a leader. According to Western beliefs a man is competitive, aggressive, intellectual, logical, and an outdoor person. Likewise, masculinity is viewed as being active, achievement oriented, dominant in interpersonal relationship, and level-headed and self contained. The Malays define masculinity as being physically strong and a logical decision maker, as well being a leader, protector and provider.

The Western and the Malay concepts of femininity are also almost identical. Westerner believe feminine ideals are beauty, passivity, warmth and qualities of being nurturing, emotional and domestic. The Malays define femininity as being nurturing, subservient, soft, polite and domestic.

In approaching this analysis from a director’s perspective, my first step is to choose and textually analyze the chosen plays. After this is done, the process of selecting designers, casting, rehearsings, and finally producing play will take place. However, the true reaction of Malaysian audience to both plays will only emerge after theatrical presentation.

The research will focus on issues regarding woman, shaped by Islamic approach. Although addressing a woman centered production, I chose not to apply any feminist theories because of the inherent claim of Islamic teaching that all human being are equal; feminist ideas conflict with this belief. I chose an Islamic perspective instead of a feminist approach because it is much more applicable in analyzing how these plays are to be presented to Malaysian audiences.

Once proven to have relevance to Malaysian culture, these plays would require an experimental approach. There are specific and unique challenges that I would face in producing these plays in Malaysia, including being a female director, working on women centered plays, requiring strong actresses, and incorporating Western theatrical presentational styles. I have a dream that the Malaysian theatre world will reach full maturity in the near future and enlarge its attitude towards new theatrical ideas and methods. I personally hope that my contribution through A Doll
House and Hedda Gabler will be one of those initial efforts in making my dream come true.

Malay Theater

The Malays have had a lively performance tradition for at least the last 500 years, with their theatre reflecting distinctive reworking of pan-Southeast-Asian patterns. Malaysia combines a variety of ethnic and cultural elements: indigenous Malay, Javanese, Sumatran, Thai, Indian and Chinese. According to Jukka O. Miettinen:

Indianized court culture was adopted from Java and Sumatra, which dominated the Malay Peninsula before the emergence of Islamic Sultanate of Malacca in the early fifteenth century. The ruling class of sultanate had close ties with Islamic India, from where some of the sultans or their forefathers had arrived. Javanese influences continued to be felt, even during the period of Malaccan hegemony, as the sultan had huge retinues of Javanese workers and servants. The sultanate of Malacca thus laid the basis not only for the Islamization of the peninsula but also for its ethnic diversity, which was gradually enriched by Chinese immigrants. The Portuguese conquered Malacca in 1511, heralding a long period of Western domination in the area of present-day Malaysia.

In this historical context, it is natural to term the Malay theatrical tradition eclectic. The various groups held specific dramatic traditions, yet none ever rose to the status of national classic form. Traditional theatre forms that still exist in Malaysia are the shadow puppet theatre which originated in Java and Thailand, and Manora another dramatic form from Thailand. Malays, being the largest individual ethnic group in modern-day Malaysia, retain a few dramatic traditions of their own. The most sophisticated, albeit rarely performed, is the mak yong, an ancient form of court theatre from the state of Kelantan. The mak yong is believed to have been derived from ancient shamanistic healing rituals, and even today its performances are regarded as having magical significance and a special healing effect. Present-day mak yong combines indigenous rituals with elements borrowed from Indonesia, the Near East, and the manora traditional of Thailand. In the twentieth century mak yong has gradually developed into a folk form usually performed by the wives of rice farmers in remote areas of Kelantan.

The popular drama in Malaysia is called Bangsawan (bangsa: people and wan: noble) and can be tracked back to popular Indian theatre. It was developed at the end of the nineteenth century in emulation of touring Indian Parsi troupes that performed Indian, Arabian and Shakespearean tales in the 1870s. Bangsawan is a melodramatic, semi-operatic drama combining songs with spoken theatre. Its sources include Arabian romances, other Islamic literature, and Malay history and it usually focuses on rulers and aristocrats with some themes borrowed from Western theatre. While its current popularity has faded, it was extremely

4 James R Brandon, p.244. It is also known as Nora or lakon jatri in Thailand, a semi ritual-entertainment form of southern Thailand
5 Jukka O. Miettinen, p.150
6 Jukka O. Miettinen, p.151.
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well-liked, especially prior to World War II when bangsawan troupes toured as far as Sumatra and Java, influencing popular theatre there.

With Bangsawan's passing, a new, more Westernized theatre appeared. These westernized theatres are the Sandiwara and modern Malay drama. Sandiwara plays were the first to use a written script, amateur actors and director. Arising initially in schools, Sandiwara appealed to Western, educated viewers. Authors dealt with historical and contemporary themes; scripts often dealt with the evils of urban modernization. Sandiwara represents a transitional link between popular Bangsawan and present-day modern drama.

Malaysian society did not emphasize theatrical studies at local universities until 1970s. The need for such programs was stressed by academicians who believed that research, restoration and teaching of local dramatic forms were necessary. Malaysia's two major universities, University Malaya and University Science Malaysia, began theatre studies program in the 1970s. The third to offer a drama and theatre program is the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, which started accepting students in 1994.

The function of theatre in Malaysia has evolved through the years. Traditional theatrical forms like Menora, Ulit Mayang and Main Puteri are still regarded as shamanistic healing rituals. Meanwhile, Bangsawan, Sandiwara and the modern play entertain, educate and instill social awareness in the audience. The similarities between the function of these theatre forms and Ibsen's in playwriting might facilitate acceptance of his work in this society for Ibsen also wrote his plays to entertain, educate

Modern theatre in Malaysia is still in its infancy, but growing healthily in aspects of acting, directing, set, costume and lighting design, as well as theatre management. Theatre is becoming a popular form of entertainment in cities since the introduction of theatre programs at local universities. These programs produce theatre professionals with strong understanding of this field.

In addition, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs conducts seminars and workshops on theatre, thereby encouraging interested individuals to learn and understand theatre better.

In Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, plays are produced throughout the year. At any given time, one can choose either Malay, English, Tamil or Chinese dramas. At least fourteen Malay plays are produced in Kuala Lumpur each year, most sponsored by the Ministry of Culture. These shows cater to the public, with ticket prices ranging between $3 to $20 (US). Theatres in Malaysia are open to everyone with no restriction to color, race or gender. Theatres always are sold out with patrons needing to book tickets in advance. When there is popular demand, a play will be produced again to meet the audience's needs. For example, in 1992 Tanah Bernanah was produced twice the same season.

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7 James. R. Brandon, p. 196.


9 “Tanah Bernanah” is a play about life style and problem faced by a squatter area community.
Woman on Stage

In issues regarding Malay women's involvement in theatre, the society does not encourage them to perform on stage because the public exhibition of a Malay woman might lead to the downfall of herself and her family's honor. Orthodox Malays, in past and present times and who strongly believe that the woman's place is at home, reject performing women (actresses, dancers and singers), for they associate them with low moral standards. This can be traced back to a few centuries ago when female performers were normally concubines of the rulers in monarchy times. Thus most Malays forbid their women to perform in public.

As a less rigid Islamic society, in the early twentieth century, the Malays accepted women on stage so long as these women abided by the rules of performances in Islam. These rules are:

1. Physical contact between man and woman is forbidden
2. One's costume and physical behavior on stage should not give visual sexual implications.
3. Religious issues should always be upheld in the play.

With these strictures in mind there is immediately a potential problem in presenting A Doll House to Malaysian audiences for it does not abide by any of the rules above. Part of my task in this research will be to find ways to overcome this problem. Hedda Gabler, on the other hand, seems to fit into the rules, with the exception of rule number three. Hedda's act of suicide is forbidden in Islamic religion. My task in producing Hedda Gabler for Malaysian audiences would be to find a suitable approach to overcome this problem. Although both plays do not directly address Islamic religious issues, indirectly they carry a message that stresses the important of maintaining male and female relationship according to defined gender role and the need for a person to change his or her fate as stated in the Al Quran.

Since the time of ancient court theatre, Malay women have participated in the theatrical arena. Mak Yong was an entirely female troupe with two male clowns in it. The women performed opening dances and stories in a dance-drama style playing all the refined male and female roles while the males played the clown roles. The Bangsawan, too has its female star called seri panggung. A Bangsawan company manager had to look for a beautiful seri panggung because her presence meant more money for the troupe.

As time passed more women came to be involved on Malaysian stages as actors, but female directors and theatre managers were few. Currently, the Malaysian theatre scene is monopolized by males, but females are encouraged to participate in the field as well. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs, which sponsors most theatre activities, provides opportunities for female directors to produce their work at the National Theatre in Kuala Lumpur. Through their efforts, prominent female directors like Faridah Merican, Normah Nordin, Rosminah Tahir and Aminah Rafor have establish their reputations. These female directors tend to work on plays with themes concerning poverty and under-privileged member of the society. Thus my intention to stage Nora and Hedda, two strong female protagonists will be revolutionizing Malaysian theatre. By the end of my research, I
hope to prove that both *A Doll House* and *Hedda Gabler* can be presented successfully to Malay audiences.

**How to choose**

As a director, choosing and intellectually analyzing these plays are only the first and second steps in wanting to produce both plays on the Malaysian stage. Once both plays are proven to be suitable to the Malaysian values, other steps are translating the plays, casting, making choices in costume and set designs, rehearsing the plays and finally staging them. As a director I will have to be careful and responsible in making my choices because my initial directorial decisions will affect my audience when the play is presented. The question that I have to ask myself in directing these plays is, 'What do I have to accomplish in wanting to make these plays viable?'

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**Chapter 2**

**Points to Consider**

Before a play can be adapted, a director needs to consider many aspects and points. Not all of them come form within the play itself.

**The Country Malaysia**

No country can be fully understood without comprehending its geographical aspect. Malaysia is a lovely tropical land, rich in diversity. Malaysia covers the Peninsula Malaysia and part of Borneo Island. It is surrounded by neighboring countries: Thailand on the north, Indonesia on the west and south, and Philippines on the south-east. Malaysia, which comprises fourteen states, became a political entity and a monarchy on September 16, 1963. The British had made Malaya (the name for Malaysia then) its colony in the year 1875. The sovereign Federation of Malaya of nine Malays States and two British settlements, achieved independence on August 31, 1957.

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Part of its diversity is found in its people, who derive from different races, origins and beliefs. The Malays, being natives of Peninsular Malaysia, represent almost 50 percent of Malaysia’s population, the Chinese 30 percent, and the Indians and Sikhs 10 percent. Another 10 percent is composed of natives of Sabah and Sarawak-Iban, Kadazan, Melanau and Dayaks. Malaysia’s multiracial makeup is the effect of British labor policies in the mid-nineteenth century when the government brought in East Indians to work at the rubber estates and Chinese from mainland China to labor in the tin mines.

The Malay of Malaysia

The British settlement also influenced the Malays culturally. Malay children of the royal families and government servants were given an English education. Unlike other children, these children were less exposed to Malay customs and Islamic teachings. The English-educated, English-speaking Malays became very westernized in their daily life, but were still Muslims, although not faithful practitioners of Islam. Their descendants can still be found among urban Malays but are considered “deviants” by other Malays. Since they are Western-oriented, members of this group prefer, support and accept Western ideas and therefore would probably accept both of the selected Ibsen’s plays. The existence of this minority group of urban Malays provides yet another valid reason to produce A Doll House and Hedda Gabler in Malaysia.

Since the Malays are the original inhabitants and the dominant ethnic group, I will focus my research on them because they will be both my largest and my most difficult audience. The Deutero-Malay settlers, primarily Mongoloid, were the ancestors of the Malays today. According to historical research, by the year 300 B.C., Malaya already had its own political structure. N.J. Ryan noted that, “They had reasonably high standard of material culture; they were not nomadic but live in villages which were the main units of society. Controlled by a headman and elders and situated on the banks of rivers or on coasts, these village units were generally self-sufficient in food and other necessities.”

While their ancestors are believed to have originated from the Mongolian race, modern Malays are descendants of people of mixed ethnicity, with immigrants from eastern and central Sumatra, Java, the Celebes, India and Arabia, and of some intermarriage between the Chinese and Siamese. Harry Miller states that the Malays are “attractive, decorous, gracious and graceful people, and among the most courteous in the world, they have a great pride in race.” They are also simple people who believe strongly in living in harmony with others.

The lifestyle of the Malays began to change after Malaysia received its independence (1957). The Malays began to leave their village and move to towards the city. Most younger generation wanted to break from traditional economic lifestyles. Young men no longer wanted to work in padi fields or become fishermen like

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15 Malaysia was known as Malaya until the year 1963 when Sabah and Sarawak become part of it.
16 N.J. Ryan, p.6.
17 Harry Miller, p.16.
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their fathers; young ladies were permitted to go to the cities to get an education and find occupations. A major influence causing this change was “The New Economic Plan” (Dasar Ekonomi Baru), a gigantic economic development program that was launched in 1960 by the Malaysian government. Economic development in rural areas helped Malays reach a higher standard of living. The people who were once farmers are now businessmen, academicians, professionals and leading politicians and have moved to urban areas.

Customs and Beliefs Of The Malay Society

The customs and beliefs of the Malays are cultural forces ranging from the animism of the aborigines to the influence of Hinduism in the sixteenth century. The Malays later embraced Islam, which is the State religion, and all Malays are Muslim. The Constitution of the Federation of Malaya (1940) defines a Malay as: “a person who professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay customs.”

As followers of Islam, the Malays conduct their daily lives based on the religion’s basic precepts: “The Five Pillars of Islam” and “The Pillars of Faith.” It is required of all Muslims to fully understand, accept wholly and faithfully practice both sets of pillars. To understand the customs and beliefs of Malays, one should know the fundamental beliefs of Islam. Briefly, “The

1. **The profession of faith.**
   There is no God but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God.

2. **Prayer**
   There are five prescribed periods each day, preceded by ritual ablutions.

3. **Zakat**
   The term is usually translated into English as ‘alms-giving.’

4. **Fasting.**
   Muslims must abstain from eating, drinking, and all sensual pleasures between dawn and dusk throughout the ninth month of Muslim calendar, *Ramadan*. Fasting encourages reflection about one’s personal behavior and promotes self-discipline.

5. **The pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca.**
   The *hajj* is required of all Muslims who are physically and financially able to undertake it. Those who do go acquire the honorific titles *Haji* (for men) and *Hajjah* (for women).

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18 Ibid., p.16
19 Harry Miller, p. 16.

“The Pillars of Faith” are as follow:

1. **Faith in the openness of God.**
   The most fundamental and the most important teaching of Prophet Muhammad, it is expressed in the primary oath as “There is no other deity but Allah” (La ilaha illallah). The expression of this belief differentiates a true Muslim from non-believer (kafir), one who associates others with God in His divinity (mushrik), or an atheist (dahriyah).

2. **Belief in God’s Angels.**
   This article purges the concept of faith from all impurities and frees it from the danger of every conceivable shadow of polytheism (shirk).

3. **Faith in the books of God.**
   The books that have been sent down to mankind through His Prophets. The Torah of Moses, Psalms (Zabur) of David, the Bible of Jesus and the Qur’an (the updated and complete book that includes all three previous books) of Muhammad.

4. **Faith in God’s Prophets.**
   Messengers of God are said to be chosen among every society, and that they brought essentially the same religion, Islam, which the Prophet Muhammad propagated. In this respect all Messengers of God stand on a par with each other. If a man believes in one of them, he, as it were believes in all.

5. **Belief in Life After Death.**
   The belief in resurrection after death and in the Day of Judgement, where the one who excels in goodness will be rewarded and the one whose evils and wrongs outweigh his good deed will be punished.

6. **The belief in fate (6. Al-Qada and Al-Qadar).**
   Allah created everything in due proportion. Nothing occurs or takes shape within the heavens or on earth but with His knowledge and by His order. There is nothing absent from the knowledge of Allah.

   One who claims to be a Muslim has to believe in “The Pillar of Faith” in order to perform and practice “The Pillar of Islam.” Both are essential to Muslims in carrying out duties as obedient servant of God. Failure to understand and follow these concepts can result in one being labeled a “deviant” in the Muslim society. Since Malays manifest both sets of pillars in their daily lives, I must consider them in approaching both Ibsen’s plays.

### The Malays World View on Woman

Nora and Hedda, like Malay women, are taken care by men in the plays. Both Nora and Hedda are the responsibility of their fathers; they then become the responsibility of their husbands after marriage. My research will focus on this aspect as an important factor in contributing to their personalities. I hope to prove that Malaysian women can find resonance in these

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22 An Arabic name for God.

women, because they too are always the responsibility of men throughout their lifetimes.

The world view of Malays is identical with the world view of other Muslims, although in some cases the Malays have their own interpretations in line with the teachings they received from the Malay ulama\textsuperscript{24} especially the Kitab Jawi\textsuperscript{25}. Since the focus of this research is on women, the Malay world view on women will be discussed in detail and will be the yardstick by which I approach both Ibsen’s plays.

In Islam, woman is respected as a companion to share a man’s sorrow, joy and burden. As a girl, a woman is supported and cared for by her father. After marriage, this obligation passes to her husband, and if she becomes a widow, her children are then obligated to support her. If she is childless, her brother will have to take over the responsibility.

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\textsuperscript{24} Name given to Muslim scholar who does vast research and reading on Islam, and shares his knowledge with others.

\textsuperscript{25} Literally, Kitab means “book”, Jawi means “people of Jawa” which also means “Malays” as the Arabs in the part referred to all the people in the Malay Archipelago as Javanese. Therefore, Malay writing using the Arabic alphabet is called Jawi writing.

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Thus it is not imperative for a woman to earn a living, since usually a large family circle insure her a special place and refuge from social and economic pressure\textsuperscript{26}. Because of this, the female’s share of inheritance is half of that allocated to a male\textsuperscript{27}. In Malay society, it is the man who bears all economic responsibilities; it is his duty to support his family completely even if his wife is rich and therefore economically independent\textsuperscript{28}.

Guidelines for Malay women on how to perform as individuals, in personal relationships and in marriage can be found in Kitab Jawi. The essential element of these guidelines is that women must perform their duties well in order to secure a place in Heaven. The following are among the guidelines for women in the Kitab Jawi:

1. The Prophet said, “If a human being can prostrate to another human being, I shall ask every woman to prostrate to her husband.

2. Disobedience to one’s husband is among the great sins. Going out of the house without getting permission from one’s husband is called disobedience and is forbidden.

\textsuperscript{26} Mohammad Nor Ngah, “Islamic World-views of Man, Society and Nature among the Malays in Malaysia,” in Mohammad Taib Osman, Malaysian World-View, p.29

\textsuperscript{27} Abdullah Yusuf, The Holy Qur’an (Maryland: Amana Corporation, 1989), 4: 11-12. An exception, however, is to be found in the matriarchal society of Negeri Sembilan, in which land inherited by the female descendant alone. According to history, people of Negeri Sembilan immigrated from Minangkabau, Acheh in the late seventeenth century. When they arrived at the Malaya Peninsula, the women sold their jewelry and bought land for the men to cultivate. It is due to this historical fact that inheritance of ancestral land from mother to daughter (called ‘adat perpatih’) is practiced by the Minangkabau society.

\textsuperscript{28} Mohammad Nor Ngah, p.30.
3. The wife should please her husband. This is the secret of a successful married life as well as the means of pleasing Allah and attaining paradise. These teachings greatly affect the woman's role in Malaysia. Women's liberation movements in Malay society do not exist. Although urban Malay women view, "The question of equality between men and women is a meaningless one, because it is like discussing the equality of a rose and a jasmine. Each has its own perfume, colour, shape and beauty." Men and women cannot be the same because their roles are not competitive but complementary. Each has certain duties and functions in accordance with his or her nature and constitution.

Duties among men and women in Islam can be categorized as duties to God, parents, fellow humans, spouses and children. Islam outlines a gender division of labor; the man's field of activity is external, while the woman's is domestic. This division has never been intended as discrimination, but rather to preserve the distinctive characteristics of both sexes while deploying their respective talents and skills in the most socially useful manner. This enables both sexes to make the best use of their innate capabilities without causing any undue disruption in the family or society.

Under Islam, the fact that men and women function in different spheres has no bearing whatsoever on their ultimate equality in the eyes of God. What matters most in Malay society is virtue in thought, word and deed, which will be taken into account for both man and woman to enter Paradise.

Islamic point of view on woman's duties and her position in society if compared to the teachings of Saint Paul in the New Testament, proves that the Malaysian viewpoint on woman is not very different from the views of the Western. Paul made clear that the relationship of wives to their husbands is in terms of their relations to Christ writing that "the husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. As the church submits itself to Christ, wives should also submit themselves to their husbands in everything." Paul saw men as superior and women as subject to their husbands. He stated that women should yield to the authority of their husband when he said in 1 Corinthians 14:32, 43:

The spirit (tual gift)s of prophets are subject to the control of prophets...

The (women) are not allowed to speak, but be in submission, as the Law says.

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30 Mohammad Nor Ngah, p. 31.
31 St. Paul was a Jew and converted to Christianity between eighteen months and five years after Jesus's death. Paul was a follower of Jesus who translated the Bible and taught it in the first century. The words and concepts with which Paul faced the situation of his life and mission have become charged with the dogmatic controversies of later generations.
34 James B. Hurley, p.142.
Paul expected wives to submit to their husbands' authority and allow the needs of the husband to come before their own needs. Paul's words actually directs the individual to self-sacrificing love. On the other hand however, Paul's writings never asked the male partner to submit himself to the subordinate female partner. It is always she who must be subordinate. "The idea of bending to meet the needs of a stronger or weaker partner in a relationship is present throughout discussions of relations involving subordination, but other words than 'submit' (tasso, typotasso) are used for the partner to who submission is due. That partner, be it God, a husband, a parent, the state, or a master, is never asked to 'submit' to the subordinate."

Saint Paul's writing on women are similar to Islamic teaching. Both state that woman is subject, demands fair subordination of woman to man and man to woman. St. Paul's teachings, on the other hand, only stress one-way subordination of woman to man and place women in inferior positions to men.

This research will also focus on whether Malay women can find resonance in the oppressed women in both of the plays by Ibsen. Female voices of protest do exist in Malay society, but protesting voices deal essentially with men not performing or neglecting their given duties. For example, Muslim society accepts and practices polygamy, but it is usually handled poorly by men. Muslim men are only allowed to practice polygamy if they can be a hundred percent fair to all their wives, but when they fail, Malaysian women voice their dissatisfaction in the name of justice and freedom. Since there are displeased women in Malay society, I will analyze whether this group would respond positively to the plays as well as to Ibsen, the playwright.

Islam urges all its believers to work hard and lift themselves to a better state. Hard times are considered by the Malays as moments that test faith. If one works hard with patience and belief in Allah to overcome his difficult times, he is seen as a champion in faith as well as in life. Both Muslim men and women are urged to work hard in this aspect. If women are suppressed by men, they have the right to work toward freeing themselves. Muslim women are encouraged to approach either older family members or religious authorities to find solution to their problem.

Likewise both female protagonist in the plays are caught in problematic situations and try to free themselves. However, the attempts they make to free themselves form their problems are contrary to the customs and beliefs of Malay society. I will find an approach where the Malay audience will sympathize with both characters and accept their methods in solving their problems. Finding where the Malay audience can sympathize and accept both Nora and Hedda will put me one step closer in presenting both the plays on the Malaysian stage.

Ibsen The Playwright

Research on a playwright enriches the understanding of his plays. In analyzing Ibsen's plays, it is important to be aware of Ibsen's life history, his personal views on issues about which he wrote and the events that surrounded his writing.

35 Ibid., p. 143
36 James B. Hurley, p. 143
Ibsen was born on March 20, 1928 at Skien in south-east Norway. He was named Henrik Johan Ibsen by his father Knud Ibsen, who was a merchant. He was actively involved in the new Norwegian theatre in Bergen as resident dramatist and state director. In 1852, the Bergen Theatre sent him, as well as other actors, for an important study tour to Dresden and Copenhagen. It was during this tour that Ibsen saw four comedies by Ludwig Holberg, the gifted eighteenth century Norwegian disciple of Moliere; from him Ibsen learned the art of keeping the action of a play moving, a debt he frequently acknowledged.

During this period, Ibsen also discovered Herman Hettner’s book *The Modern Drama*, which stressed psychological conflict as the basis of drama. This influenced him in creating his characters and made him realize that in serious literary work no character is wholly good or evil, but rather a mixture of the two. As a result of this influence, Ibsen became known for his balanced and realistic characters. His audience could relate to his characters because they are so true to life.

Ibsen based his plays on situations from contemporary society, including events he observed or read about in newspapers. He also followed Scribe’s formula for a well-made play:

1. A plot based on a secret known to the audience but withheld from certain characters (who have been long engaged in a battle of wits) until its revelation (or the direct consequence thereof) in the climactic scene serves to unmask a fraudulent character and restore to good fortune the suffering hero, with whom the audience has been made to sympathize.

2. A pattern of increasingly intense action and suspense, prepared by exposition (this pattern assisted by contrived entrances and exits, letters, and other devices).

3. A series of ups and downs in the hero’s fortunes, caused by his conflict with adversary.

4. The counterpunch of *peripeteia* (a series of mishaps suffered by the hero) and the “obligatory” scene, marking, respectively, the lowest and the highest point in the hero’s adventures, and brought about by disclosure of secrets to

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41 Augustine-Eugene Scribe was one of the most indefatigable and prolific playwrights the stage has ever known. His work for the theatre totaled 374, where 216 were comedies-vaudevilles. Comedies-vaudevilles were simple plays in which comic and serious scenes were bound together by satirical or jovial songs known as vaudevilles. In this kind of comedy the action—all the structure of complication and reversal at sustains suspense and delays the resolution—dominates everything else.
42 Maurice Valency, *The Flower And The Castle: An Introduction To Modern Drama* (New York: The Macmillan co., 1963), p. 120.
the opposing side.

5. A central misunderstanding or *quid pro quo* (two or more characters interpret a word, or by extension, a situation in different ways, all the time assuming that their interpretations are the same), made obvious to the spectator but withheld from the participants.

6. A logical and credible denouement.

7. The reproduction of the overall action pattern in the individual acts.

Ibsen wrote his plays based on the well-made play formula but ended them realistically. Ibsen’s realistic endings either shocked his audiences or left them with a question to ponder. Nora in *A Doll House*, who is portrayed as a dependent wife, shocks her audience when she walks out on her husband and family. Hedda in *Hedda Gabler*, who faces an identity crisis, also shocks her audience when she commits suicide at the end of the play. I believed that the Malay audiences would appreciate the general structure of *A Doll House* and *Hedda Gabler*, and be shocked by the unpredictability of their endings.

Ibsen not only wrote his plays with contemporary social issues in mind, but also filled them with characters similar to real people with whom he came in contact. Most characters in his plays can somehow be related to personal acquaintances, some of also inspired his plays. In drawing on life models for characters, Ibsen created natural believable roles. In certain cases, some of Ibsen’s characters seemed so real that they were judged and discussed by audiences, as if they were real-life human beings.

In *A Doll House*, Ibsen’s life model for Nora Helmer was Laura Keiler who committed forgery and was in debt, like Nora. Ibsen learned about Laura’s situation from his wife, in whom Laura had confined, and from a personal communication from Laura herself. He also received a letter from Laura’s husband, Victor Keiler, who was a teacher in Hillerød, Denmark. According to Egil Tornqvist:

The forgery was discovered, and the bank refused payment whereupon she told her husband the whole story. He, regardless of the fact that she had done it purely for his sake... told her she was unworthy to have charge of their children and... had her committed to a public asylum... and demanded a separation so that the children could be removed from her care. After a month she was discharged from the asylum and, for the children’s sake, begged her husband to take her back, which he very grudgingly agreed to do.

Although Nora’s situation in *A Doll House* is similar to Laura’s, Ibsen reversed it when he had the wife divorce her husband rather than the other way around. He also deviated from the real-life model by refraining from a possible return of Nora. He makes a change from real life to show his audience, women particularly, what the possibility can be if the problem is handled in another way.

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In creating Hedda in *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen is believed to have based his character on a Swedish feminist author, Victoria Benedictsson whose pseudonym was Ernst Ahlren. Katherine Hanson in her article, “Ibsen’s Women Characters and Their Feminist Contemporaries,” wrote:

Benedictsson was born in 1850, and in 1888 took her own life. In 1889 a small book was written by Ellem Key (a leader in the feminist movement in Sweden), dedicating it to the memory of her friend which she entitled *Ernst Ahlgren, some biographical notes*. In this book Key brings to light bits and pieces of personal information from Benedictsson’s childhood and youth, her unhappy marriage, her periods of illness, her struggle to find time and energy to write, her intimate correspondence with Axel Lundergard, her last years in Copenhagen. As a child she was partial to her father, an outdoor man whose dream to pursue a career in military had not been realized. In Benedictsson’s own words: “He taught me to ride, to wrestle, to shoot with a pistol as well as other manly sports; he treated me quite like a boy.” Many years later, in 1884, she entered into an intimate relationship with another man, a young rebellious writer named Axel Lundegard. For two years they kept up an active correspondence in which they address each other as Comrade! And discuss literature and philosophy, the need to be honest and true to one’s own self, as well as topics which, in that time of Victorian morality, were taboo for women.

Ibsen had met Victoria Benedictsson briefly in Stockholm in 1886, but he obviously remembered her because, in January 1889, he wrote to Gustaf af Geijerstam saying, “Mrs. Benedictsson’s death and your compassionate depiction of her life have made a lasting impression on me. I know her too short a time to truly and deeply understand that time we met in Stockholm.” It is not surprising that Ibsen’s short acquaintance with Victoria Benedictsson and his reading of Key’s book gave him the idea to model Hedda after Victoria.

As Malaysian’s social measurement are based on religion, it is important that Ibsen’s views on religion are also included in this research. I deduce from my reading that Ibsen was not in favor of religion (Christianity). Ibsen believed that the “revolution of the spirit of man” can only be attained by a race of freer-thinking, finer-feeling beings, fit to create and enter into an atmosphere of moral liberty. He was also critical of the traditional codes of ethics as adequate instruments for the regulation of human relations. Ibsen’s criticism was directed both against abstract demands claiming absolute validity and all codes and social norms making similar claims for conformity. Traditional codes of ethics and social norms to which Ibsen referred were social practices that were imposed by religion. His conception of religion as an obstacle to human freedom can be noticed in characters like Pastor Manders in *Ghosts*, whose advices makes Mrs. Alving serve a life imprisonment of sorrow by staying with a husband.

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46 Katherine Hanson, “Ibsen’s Women Characters and Their Feminist Contemporaries,” *Theatre History Studies* 2, 1982, p.89
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
who cheats on her, and at the end of the plays, having to lose her son. Another play that reflects Ibsen's hostility towards religion is Brand. According to F.W. Kaufman:

The young pastor in this play gradually abandons all dogmatic fixation as a distortion of the idea of transcendence. Brand's metaphysical error consists in the fact that he attributes absolute validity to one single aspect of human existence, that he tries to universalize his own personal experience. For his image of the godhead grew out of bitterness, hatred and unrequited love. Therefore his deity is a rigorous God who demands the abnegation of Vital human drivers, the crippling of emotions.  

Ibsen's true religion was his own belief of portraying human freedom in his writings. It was this idea that constantly drove him to create. Regarding Ibsen's spiritual beliefs, Halvdan Khot notes:

The constant struggle for freedom, the endless effort of reveal the true self, these were the sources of spiritual exaltation, in art and in poetry, in all true culture. The future would depend on the creation of poetry out of action, on recasting into the art the conflicts of the day in such a way that art became a meaningful force in the life the people. This was Ibsen's true religion; he believed it because he believed in himself  

Ibsen also admitted that his mission was not only to portray human character and human destiny in general, but to put forth the conflict in man's mind between the demand for freedom and the forces that hindered its realization. In his plays he ceaselessly experimented with new ways to analyze this conflict in dramatic terms.

It is out of this belief that Ibsen develop the characters of Nora and Hedda. In both plays, Ibsen stressed the need for domesticated women to be given the freedom to perform their roles independently, to make decisions, and realize their inner selves. If this freedom is not practiced, then unbalanced relationship will result. Ibsen intelligently portrays this idea in both his plays.

Although Ibsen's attitude towards religion is different from the Malays, who treat religion as a way of life, it surprises me that the belief in the need for human freedom can be reconceived with the teachings of Islam. This fact would probably enable certain elements in Ibsen's play to be accepted and the playwright himself to be glorified by Malay audiences.

**Historical Context:**

**Western Women In The Late Nineteenth Century**

Historical context of the selected plays are important element in this research. This knowledge give a better understanding of what women faced in the nineteenth century and how that relates their concerns to Ibsen's writing on human freedom.
freedom.

Since the Enlightenment, the Western world has undergone a number of major changes: namely, the industrial, economic, and political revolutions. However, each appeared to operate, to a large extent, without much of a visible or direct effect upon one half of humanity. Kate Millett argues:

It is rather disturbing how the great changes brought about by the extension of the franchise and by the development of democracy which the eighteenth and nineteenth century accomplished, the redistribution of wealth which was the aim of socialism (and which has even had its effect upon the capitalist countries) and finally, the vast changes brought by the industrial revolution and the emergence of technology - all, had and to some degree still have, but a tangential and contingent effect upon the majority population who might be female.

During this period, primary social and political distinctions were not based on wealth or rank, but were based on sex. My findings on this subject proves that the Western society in the late nineteenth century practiced double standards in dealing with issues regarding man and woman. This society clearly failed to treat females as equals to males and in certain cases even abused them.

My reading on women and the nineteenth century, shows that women -especially wives - were greatly oppressed by men. The oppression faced by wives of this century included physical abuse, legal and social injustice. “Man” made laws excluded women and prevented them from many privileges. Women were said to have undergone “civil death” upon marriage, forfeiting what amounted to every human right, as felons now do upon entering prison. As Kate Milletts states:

A woman lacked control over her earnings, was not permitted to choose her domicile, could not manage property legally her own, sign papers, or bear witness. Her husband owned both her person and her services, could – and did – rent her out in any form he pleased and pocket the profits. He was permitted to sue others for wages due her labor, services, or act during “coverture” became the legal property of the male.\(^5\)

Discrimination of the sexes in education also took place in the mid nineteenth century. This can be traced by looking at the differences in education between boys and girls. Boys were allowed to receive education away from home; girls had to stay at home. Pamela Horn in her book Ladies of the Manor, writes about how discrimination in the education between boys and girls took place in 1858, “… Boys went to preparatory school and then on to public schools .. but it was not at all usual for girls to go to boarding school.”\(^6\)

In another case, Pamela Horn states that parents raised their female children in a rigid manner. They were constantly reminded of their obligation to uphold family honor and parents encouraged

\(^6\) Pamela Horn, Ladies of the Manor: Wives and Daughters in Country-house Society 1830-1918 (London: The Bath Press, 1991), p. 24. This statement was a recollection of the Countess of Selborne, the former Lady Maud Cecil (b. 1858), oldest child of the third Marquess of Salisbury
Nora And Hedda In Malaysian Theatre

decorous behavior. As an example, Susan Tweedsmuir recalled that the servants’ lives appeared much more alluring than that of the elders in their family. She visited the servants’ quarters because:

[T]he atmosphere behind the baize door was one of joke and laughter, and from a child’s point of view far preferable to that of the drawing-room where we found it only too easy to knock something over ... (The) vivid and interesting life going on below stairs was like the difference between eating plain bread and rich cake....

The rigidity in raising a girl in the mid-nineteenth century can be noticed in how many parents took the view that children should be seen and not heard. Signs of individuality in the young, if observed, were firmly nipped in the bud. A female child was only permitted to think under supervision. The rigidity in raising female children in this era can be connected to both of the two analyzed plays. In fact, Nora in A Doll House relates a situation similar to Susan Tweedsmuir’s when speaking of her childhood in this play.

Most wives in the nineteenth century were also mistreated by men. Husbands took advantage of their roles as leaders and abused their helpless wives. Instead of protecting their wives, husband harmed them physically if their services were dissatisfying. The authors of The Changing Experience of Women, state that “commonly, the woman is pushed or punched to the floor and then severely kicked in the head and body... Kicking and standing on women was practice with hobnailed boots in Yorkshire during the late nineteenth century and was called “purring.”

Towards the third quarter of the nineteenth century, women began to protest against the injustice done them. What Western women needed at that time, according to Margaret Fuller was “not a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as it was given to them.”

In Norway, as a reaction to these voices of protest, Camilla Collett (1813-1895) produced a realistic novel that critically discussed social issues and conditions. The novel, The Governor's

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57 Ibid., p. 27-28
58 Ibid., p.28.
Daughters, was published in installments from 1854 to 1855 and is a bitter attack on the institution of marriage with its total disregard of the woman's preference and feelings.

Aasta Hansteen (1824-1908) is another Norwegian woman whose views were not nearly as articulate as Collet's but who was a more outspoken proponent of women's rights62.

Voices of women’s rights did manage to get attention from some members of the opposite sex and Ibsen was one of them. Ibsen is said to have come into contact with these women and their works63. As a person who stressed human freedom in his works, Ibsen understood these women’s “voices.” Ibsen, on more than one occasion, demanded that laws be changed to grant woman greater freedom and equality. In 1879, in an impassioned speech to the members of the Scandinavian Society in Rome, Ibsen urged that the position of librarian be filled by a woman and, furthermore, that women in the Society be given the right to vote. Five years later, in 1884, Ibsen, together with other Norwegian authors – Bjornstjerne Bjornson, Jonas Lie and Alexander Kielland – wrote in support of a petition demanding that married women be given the right to own property, and in more general terms, be awarded legal authority64. The condition of women in nineteenth century society was partly the reason for Ibsen to create emancipated women like Nora and Hedda in his plays.

This analysis of women in Western culture in the nineteenth century enables us to see the similarities between present-day Malay culture and Western culture during that period. In both culture, women were and are oppressed by men although the Islamic teaching give an equal position to woman. This fact proves and strengthens the need to analyzed both plays because they carry similar issues in them. Both plays were written over a century ago when women suffered oppression by men in various forms. In the Western world, Ibsen and his plays were put on a pedestal by people who approved of women’s liberation and were detested by others who were against it. By presenting these plays, I believe Malay audience, especially the women, will be indirectly enlightened about women’s rights and become aware of any form of injustice that is done by the opposite sex.

Chapters Three and Four will use Malay measurements on women to find the resonant and dissonant aspects of Nora and Hedda to the Malaysian audience. The result of this analysis will later enable me to decide the direction of the production process when presenting *A Doll House* and *Hedda Gabler* on the Malaysian Stage.

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62 Katherine Hanson, p. 84.
63 Halvan Khot, p.311-312
64 Katherine Hanson, p. 83.