



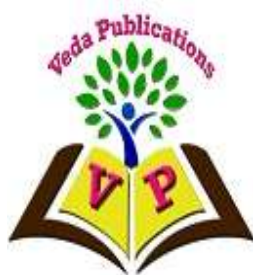
READING CHRIST AND SWEDENBORG IN AUGUST STRINDBERG'S *GHOST SONATA*

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ABSTRACT



August Strindberg (1849 – 1912), Swedish playwright, poet and painter is known for his experiments in promoting theatre as an intimate introspective experience inspiring meditative reflection. His Chamber plays have often been perceived as being preoccupied with the dynamics of sinning and evil. In this paper I shall discuss the *Ghost Sonata* - one of Strindberg's Chamber plays, as drama that is diabolical in its content but leads to the reverse aspects of the spiritual and the spirit.

Strindberg was an avid follower of Emanuel Swedenborg's tenets. His philosophy of life, his insights into the spirit world of angels and souls of the dead along with his spiritual stature as 'the new age Buddha of the West' is well acknowledged, so also his magnum opus, his book *Heaven and Hell*.

The purgatory hell played out in the *Ghost Sonata* disturbs the perceptive reader, at the same time it also leads her to the playwright's engagement with ideas of spiritual purity and the route available to sinning humankind through the process of purgation, repentance and redemption. References are made to Christ and the Buddha, but none to Swedenborg who in fact was a huge driving force for Strindberg and his interest in the occult. Perhaps the large sized statue of the Buddha mentioned in Act three of the *Ghost Sonata* was in fact an allusion to his very own mentor Emanuel Swedenborg, the 'new age Buddha'?

Keywords: *Occult, Diabolic, Deconstructive, Christian, Swedenborgian.*

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"And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose. (Matthew 27:52).

Jesus said: Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep . . . Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead" (John 11:11, 14).

(Think for a moment of our Lord's last words as He hung dying upon the Cross.)

"Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, He gave up the ghost" (Luke 23:46).

<https://bible.org/seriespage/8-consciousness-soul-after-death> Taken on 31/1/2018.

The above citation which is taken from a few New Testament verses makes it clear that man's conscious existence is endless. Death according to Christ was but a long sleep from which the dead Lazarus must be awakened. Since the soul is part of a man's body and never dies, the dead too are therefore, alive. This essay attempts an ecclesiastical reading of August Strindberg's Chamber play, *The Ghost Sonata*, within the conceptual framework of terms such as surreal, expressionist, Christian, occult, karma and Buddha – a nomenclature that by extension also includes the spiritual genius, Emanuel Swedenborg, an 18th century philosopher popularly known as the 'New Age Buddha of the West'. It is a well known fact that Strindberg was a keen follower of Swedenborg whose keen interactions with the spirit world and insights into the occult and afterlife worlds are well documented in his book *Heaven and Hell*.

Along with Norway's Henrik Ibsen and Russia's Anton Chekhov, Sweden's August Strindberg (1849-1912) is perceived as a leading dramatist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Of the three, Strindberg with his contributions to modern drama, his experimentations in intimate theatre and avant-garde drama, surfaces as most seminal to the evolution of modern drama.

An eclectic blend of Surrealism and Realism in his Chamber plays gives voice to expressionistic theatre that stretches towards the absurd and diabolic which in turn is underscored by concerns that are moral, spiritual and even Christian. In the *Ghost Sonata*, Strindberg employs the death motif to

take a circuitous route to the question of what it is that we need to have if we are to live a life of abundance, joy and health? As the Student in the play words it, (he that is least touched by pollution or not at all), even 'The wretched earth aspires for heaven. That is what Buddha is waiting for.' (33)

The plot of the play is more in retrospect than actual: A young man – a Student who has spent the night rescuing people trapped in a building that collapsed before his very own eyes, turns overnight into a local hero. When the play begins he is on his way back home. He runs into Old Man Jacob Hummel who clever-talks him into employment as personal secretary. The Student is attracted to the young girl who lives in the house across. Old Man offers to help him make her acquaintance and the Colonel's - the girl's legal father. Eventually that very evening the Student gets invited to supper by Colonel. To that same dinner, the Old Man invites himself as well. It turns out that the Old Man has had a long history with members of that family. In a distant past Old Man had cuckolded the Colonel (who was having an affair with Old Man's fiancée) and this very affair with the Colonel's wife Amelia/Mummy had climaxed into the birth of a beautiful young girl. The Old Man harbours a huge grudge against the Colonel and has invited himself to dinner to settle scores, he intends to expose the Colonel's treacheries and take away from him all that now rightfully belongs to him – the house whose mortgage he has paid for, the Colonel's fiancé who originally was his, the young girl who in fact is his seed and whom he wishes to see happily married to the Student whom he has just employed. Soon as they all gather around the infamous dinner table, crafty Old Man Jacob begins. "Everything, I own everything (in this house). It is all mine." (25). He robs the Colonel even of his title and family name. He strips him to the skin, he says,

Take off that wig and have a look at yourself in the mirror. While you are at it, take out your false teeth and shave your moustache. Let Bengtsson unlace your corset and perhaps a certain Mr. X.Y.Z., a lackey, a servant, will recognize himself. The fellow



who was a cupboard lover in a certain kitchen, who flirted with maids so he could scrounge for food... (26).

The plan however is sabotaged by the intervention of Amelia – the shrivelled living dead Mummy - who has spent 20 long years repenting her misdeeds in a cupboard and whom the Colonel is trying to divorce. In a bid to redeem herself she exposes old man Jacob and brings to light all the crimes committed by him who in fact is the worst of the lot. He is a murderer, a sweet tongued manipulator and far more evil than the Colonel. She says to him,

We are wretched creatures – us human beings. We know that. We have erred, we have sinned – we like all the rest. We are not what we seem. For at the core we are better than ourselves, since we detest our sins. But when you, Jacob Hummel, with your false name, choose to sit in judgement on us, you prove to be more contemptible than us miserable sinners. You are a slave trader, a trafficker of human souls. You once stole me with false promises. You murdered the Consul who was buried today; you strangled him with debts. You have stolen the student and shackled him with an imaginary debt of his father's who never owed you a penny.. (30)

More revelations follow and finally, Jacob Hummel must march into the same cupboard where Amelia spent 20 years in penitence, and hang himself, which he does. In the adjacent room where the Student woos the Young Girl we discover that the Girl ails from a strange slow disease, plus she is depressed – spiritually fatigued - and therefore cannot marry. Laden with the drudgery of living, as

she says, one must keep 'the filth of life' and living away. And after all that, she wonders, 'Is life really worth so much hardship?'

After a beautiful interaction on the symbolic significance of shallots, hyacinths, cosmic splendour and the Buddha waiting for earth to transform into heaven, the Girl passes away – the suggestion being that she that has flowered on the soil of so much crime and evil is infected and therefore unfit to live a life of health and happiness. The Student prays to Christ, to Buddha, for purgation and a resurrection.

References are made during the play, to the playing of the church organ and church bells, in the girl's room which is also called the 'hyacinth room,' filled as it is with an assortment of different coloured hyacinths, there stands a large sized statue of the Buddha. There are some ghosts too – the Milkmaid, the Consul and the little boy - they walk in and out of the play at key junctures. They the dead are silent participants of the human drama, visible to a select few as they move among the living - not as flames of light but in their human forms that are supposedly translucent and can be seen by only a chosen few. This representation of dead human spirits that haunt, in *Ghost Sonata*, is commensurate with Swedenborg's idea of spirits and what they look like. In section No 456, of *Heaven and Hell*, he writes,

Years and years of daily experience have witnessed to me that after separation from the body the human spirit is a person and is in a similar form. I have seen this thousands of times, I have heard such spirits, and I have talked with them even about the fact that people in the world do not believe that they are what they are, and that scholars think people who do believe are simpletons. Spirits are heartsick over the fact that this kind of ignorance is still common in the world and especially in the church. They say, however, that this belief stems especially from academics who have thought about the soul on the basis of physical sensory reality. The only concept this can yield is



one of pure thought, and when this lacks any medium in which and on the basis of which it is examined, it is like some volatile form of pure ether that can only dissipate when the body dies. Since the church believes in the immortality of the soul on the basis of the Word, though, they cannot help but attribute something vital to it, something thought like. However, they do not attribute to it any sensory capacity like ours until it is reunited with its body. Their doctrine of the resurrection is based on this notion, as is their belief that there will be a reunion [of soul and body] when the Last Judgment comes. The result is that when people think about the soul on the basis of both doctrine and speculation, they do not at all grasp the fact that it is the spirit and that it is in human form. There is also the fact that hardly anyone nowadays knows what the spiritual is, let alone that people who are spiritual, as all spirits and angels are, have a human form. [Taken from 'We are still human after death', *Swedenborg Foundation*.

<https://swedenborg.com/emanuel-swedenborg/writings/short-excerpts-and-downloads/still-human-death/>]

It is highly plausible that Strindberg's understanding of death as a natural transition; along with his portrayal of ghosts as identifiable human forms that can be seen but not heard, by a chosen few, indicates the influence of Swedenborg. For Strindberg's portrayal of ghosts is contrary to the Bible's perception of dead spirits /ghosts as formless flames. According to references in the Bible, the soul continues to live but it loses its human form and if and when it does interact with the human world it appears as a flame of light. It is strange that Strindberg's student refers only to Christ and to the

Buddha, no reference whatsoever is made to Emanuel Swedenborg – the new age Buddha, who was his spiritual and occult mentor. Perhaps the large sized statue of the Buddha in the hyacinth room is an indirect reference and a tribute by Strindberg to Swedenborg – the new age Buddha of the West – which is highly likely.

The play is replete with allusions to Biblical notions of what it is to be evil, to be sinful, and how the path of repentance which goes through the purgatory hell of suffering leads finally to redemption. The Mummy who has passed 20 long years suffering in a cupboard, a living death, is an example. In the last scene when all the characters converge around an oblong table, it is she and she alone that has the moral right, and spiritual strength got from repentance and redemption, to pronounce death upon the evil mortals of the play. Old man Jacob who is a chronic sinner, guilt ridden and yet a compulsive bully, initiates the process of pronouncing judgement over the Colonel but is later paid back in similar terms by Mummy (the once beautiful Amelia). He totally shrivels up in face of shriving at the hands of Mummy who is herself but a shrivelled apparition of her former beautiful self. It is however her purged spirit that asserts and shines forth.

In a brilliant improvisation of the original 'last supper', all the characters/sinners (except the young student and girl) congregate around the dinner table in the last scene of the play where justice in the final hour is doled out – not by Jacob but by the Mummy - the only character that has repented and suffered for her sins and is therefore now redeemed. Jacob must die by hanging the same way that he strangled the dead man Consul; and the Colonel who has sinned and thieved but not murdered, must be allowed to leave with his fiancé if she will still take him, and the Mummy must survive a life of yet more isolation as she faces a divorce, and the deaths of both her daughter and former paramour. Thus the last scene which recalls Christ's last supper is symbolic of patterns of betrayal, the reversal of fortunes through judgement and finally, resurrection. Meanwhile the young girl must go to sleep as the student gently watches and sings. 'The Liberator is coming. Welcome pale and gentle one.Sleep.



Sleep a dreamless sleep.Buddha, wise and gentle Buddha, grant us purity of will and patience in our ordeals. ...'

Death – spiritual, moral and physical - it appears is the central theme of the play and therefore we can surmise, logically speaking, that life is the central theme of the play. Enmeshed in webs of guilt, greed and sin, the death of the characters is both literal and symbolic. Also, it is interesting, there are all levels of the living and dead. There are ghosts, there are the living and there are those that fall among the living dead. Church bells, flowers of mourning – the hyacinths, white sheets, food without nourishment – psychic warfare of which the 'ogress' cook is an example, the potency of greed, spiteful intent and mental theft are abstractions which are not only acknowledged but exist in the play as a physically moving reality and force. Then there is the ceremony of ritual – the flowers, the large Buddha statue, the death screen and the dinner table where the family has sat for meals all these years, in utter silence.

Strindberg's plays have often been labelled as being evil; this charge however, is questionable when one looks at the element of the spiritual occult that underlies the surreal and the bizarre that prevails all through his chamber plays. For instance how is it the student who has just walked away from working all night at the site of disaster is already being reported in the morning newspaper? Or, how is it that the shrivelled up apparition of Amelia the Mummy who has been shut up in a cupboard prating like a parrot, how is it that she knows all of Jacob's secrets? How is it that the Student and later the old man are able to see the drowning Milkmaid's ghost? How can the cook take away all nourishment from the food she serves at the family table? These are matters of the realm of voodoo and psychic warfare. Seen in light of Strindberg's engagement with the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, the bizarre dynamics of the theatrical hell makes better sense and we are able to see it for what it is - a purgatory hell and space of judgement, underlined by a deep underbelly of Christian, Buddhist and Swedenborgian tenets that once again alert us and caution us to save ourselves from the maya of 'Kama loka,' - the blind world of desires, from which we are recalled through

the character of the Student, to turn towards the potency of goodness, faith, and moral character which must prevail if we are to overcome the unrelenting hand of karmic law and karma. Incidentally, 'Kama Loka' was the subtitle of *Ghost Sonata* when it was first printed.

To conclude, although spiritual darkness, evil and guilt, landscape the very fabric of *Ghost Sonata*, the play emerges as a postmodernist, deeply disturbing and spiritual text. As a chamber play, it was performed in intimate theatres, to small audiences of not more than 150. The intimate dynamics of the theatre with its small seating spaces was designed to create a form of drama that was meditative - inwardly engaging and introspective rather than entertaining. The experimentation, the absurdity and the liberties that the playwright took with the script and performance of the play, were all aimed at sensitising audiences into keener awareness of reality. And this was possible only when a play was performed in small closed spaces with a limited audience open to serious focus and engagement with the writer's work.

Theatre as meditation hopes to initiate introspection and hasten all around, a spiritual reckoning; sure enough in the *Ghost Sonata* where we have a world polluted by evil intention and evil beings – mostly old sinning people who stand at death's threshold, clinging to their evil rags and yet desperate for salvation – we have all around some beauty and largely signs of moral decay, abundant death symbols such as white sheets, shallots and hyacinths - the flowers of mourning, broken hearts, insidious love affairs, ghosts and a prating Mummy who thinks she is a parrot... and at the centre of it all we have the young Student and the beautiful hyacinth Girl who are in love but must bow before the reality of their unequal worlds which will not allow them to meet. Not in this life at least. As the Girl meets her death, gently behind the death screen, several spiritual tenets have been played out; utopian ideas have been deconstructed and the onion of illusion unpeeled. The Student now stands washed in the light of the sun of reality.

I saw the sun. To me it seemed
that I beheld the Hidden.

Men must reap what they have sown,



blest is he whose deeds are good.

.....

No fear has he who does no ill.

Sweet is innocence.' (42)

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BIO-NOTE

Neeti Singh is a poet, translator and researcher who works as an English Faculty with the Department of English, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. She has an M.A., M.Phil. and a Ph.D. in English.

She has published three books which are as follows:

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2. The second which was appreciated for its broad scope and depth of scholarship is based on her doctoral research work. It is titled *Bhakti Poetry in Medieval India: Its Inception, Context & Impact With Reference to the Works of Kabir and Nanak*. Sarup & Sons, New Delhi: 2002.
3. *Bhai Jaita's Sri Gur Katha*, 2015. Translated, edited with an Introduction by Neeti Singh. Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2015.

An intense mystic orientation underlies all of Neeti Singh's work – be it then her poems, her years of involvement with English theatre or her vocal renditions in Hindustani Classical music.
