

AN ANALYSIS OF THE UNDERLYING FEMINISM IN HENRIK IBSEN'S A DOLL'S HOUSE

Abstract

This paper intends to throw light on the women characters, as framed in the plays of the Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen. Since time immemorial women have been portrayed as meek, submissive, “angels of the house”. Henrik Ibsen, also known as the “father of realism”, through his problem or realist plays rewrote the rules of drama. He turned the world of European dramas into a world of moral analysis rather than being a world full of playthings. Ibsen's female characters emerge to challenge accepted cultural notions about femininity and domesticity because of their dissatisfaction with those who maintain the patriarchal status quo. In his works, Ibsen has portrayed females as ‘ahead of their time’ characters, not acceptable in the society of those times. The women in the industrialized world of the bourgeois class, remain an important concern in Ibsen's plays. The period saw great interest in a discussion of the place accorded to women in society. The condition of women during those times will be understood through an in-depth analysis of Ibsen's famous play- “A Doll's House”.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Subjugation, Realism, Naturalism

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I. INTRODUCTION

“He called me his doll-child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls.” (Ibsen 118)

Henrik Ibsen has given a wide variety of sensational plays during his lifetime. *A Doll's House* is one of the most famous works of Henrik Ibsen. It is a sensational play that made headlines at the time of its publication, caused a wave of disruption in society, and continues to be his greatest work. The play begins at Christmas Eve with the female protagonist Nora Helmer happily arranging presents and decorating the Christmas tree in her living room. She has spent eight years in domestic bliss with her husband Torvald Helmer and three children. Her husband works at the bank and is being promoted to manager soon. Things are working out for them in their favor, and they cannot imagine it to be better. They are looking forward to their days of peace and delight, but their happy married life is shadowed by a secret.

Nora, a caring, dutiful wife, had borrowed money from Krogstad, a man of ill repute. The money had been borrowed to save her sick husband's life, but he had no idea of what his wife did to save him. Now Krogstad has come back to threaten Nora to reveal her secret, because his position at the bank is being given to someone else because of his past records. Krogstad wishes for Nora to negotiate with her husband as he is going to be the manager and is an old school acquaintance of Torvald's. But Torvald is against the idea of helping Krogstad because of his own personal reasons. Thus, Nora is extorted to get the position which Krogstad wants, leaving her at the crossroads. Nora is left with a choice between trying to preserve the secret or the truth finally becoming known. At the end of the play, Nora decides to leave her husband and children, realizing that she still has to search for her own individual identity and freedom before fulfilling the role of being a mother and wife.

II. STATUS OF WOMEN IN NINETEENTH CENTURY EUROPE

A Doll's House is centered on the idea of a woman's right to self-development. Ibsen is concerned with the problem of women's position in society. The theme which is most prevalent in this play is the duties of an individual towards themselves and achieving the individuality and freedom in society which they are deprived of as an individual. The fact that the play did not have a happy ending did not sit well with a lot of the audience, many of whom discussed at length whether Nora's decision to leave her husband and children was right. This play had sparked a lot of discussion in the audience about the character of Nora who defies the patriarchal norms of those times and breaks the image of a typical Victorian woman by deciding to leave her husband. According to the male oriented society, Nora has done an action, quite unlikely for a middle-class woman in ordinary circumstances. But to the female one, she wants to prove herself as an independent human being capable of living a satisfactory life according to their own terms and not on the dictates of the male society. *A Doll's House* may be said to be the story of a quite immature woman who suddenly wakes up and sees her marital situation, sees the lie on which she has based her life. In her eight years of a blissful married life, she has not been able to see the true nature of her husband.

Throughout the play Nora is objectified as a fragile woman. Her individuality and freewill are absent in most of the play as expected of a Victorian woman. Women were

taught to be angels of the house. Society prescribed a strict role for women as 'angels of the house.' To be an angel of the home was to take care of that home, attend to one's children, ensure the comfort of one's husband... and little else. The women were meant to live for the sake of others and not for their own sake. They were meant to be an attractive instrument in their husbands' hands, meant only to be loved and cherished and not to state their opinions on worldly and homely policies and decisions. Henrik Ibsen, in *Notes for Modern Tragedy* (1878), insists "a woman cannot be herself in modern society. It is an exclusively male society." The play is set in the bourgeois world where women are preached the rules and regulations set by society- the so-called society comprising of men who always wanted control over female population. The play brings to light this condition of women through the characters of Nora Helmer and Mrs. Linde.

All through the play the character of Nora is shown as being that of a perfect wife and mother, a person who is quite satisfied with her married life and sees no problem with her husband addressing her in the endearments of love. In reality, these endearments are the qualities which Torvald wishes to imbibe in his wife so that she is the perfect example of 'the angel of the house.' Torvald calls Nora 'my little lark,' 'my little squirrel.' (Ibsen 10). These endearments might seem lovely to Nora until she reaches a point where she understands Torvald's intent of controlling her through sweet talk. In Act 1, when Nora conceals the fact of Krogstad's visit from Torvald, he replies to her in the following way:

Helmer: Didn't you tell me no one had been here? My little songbird must never do that again. A songbird must have a clean beak to chirp with- no false notes!(Ibsen 49)

This shows the power which he has over Nora calling her a bird meant to be caged and kept under control by its owner- the caged bird being Nora and the owner being Torvald. Another instance of Torvald controlling Nora comes to light when she eats macaroons in hiding from her husband who does not allow her to eat anything sweet. This controlling nature is also visible when Nora talks about her father saying that she had to agree with the opinions of her father on every matter. By the end of the play Nora realizes that she had been only a plaything for both Torvald and her father.

Nora: I mean that I was simply transferred from papa's hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste.....I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. (Ibsen 118)

III. SUBVERSION OF GENDER ROLES

Nora comes to the realization that as she had been a doll-wife to her husband the same way the children had been her dolls and that their home had been "nothing but a playroom." (Ibsen 119). Nora realizes that their marriage, which seemed to be a conventional one, was in reality just a myriad of deception. She had created a myriad for her own satisfaction and for consoling herself about the fact that her married life was happy. The secret that she had been hiding from Torvald comes knocking at the doors of her satisfactory life causing the myriad marriage to tumble down in just three days. Thus, she quits her earlier world and goes out into the real world to discover the truth about herself and her values. The fact that men because of their manly independence do not receive help from anyone else, especially women, shows the unequal gender roles prevalent during those times.

Women were always taught to be subservient and to stand by for their knight in shining armor whereas the opposite was expected of a man in the same situation. This is the reason which causes Nora to be a liar because she understands that her husband would never approve of her way of acquiring money. Firstly, the act of borrowing money from a stranger would go against his reputation and also affect his manly pride as he would be accepting help from a stranger and his wife. The other reason behind Torvald's disapproval is that women were not meant to interfere in financial matters and acquiring a loan without their husbands' consent was a grave crime during those times. The fact that Nora has taken a loan of about two hundred and fifty pounds from Krogstad, a man of bad reputation without his approval comes as a great shock for Torvald. The revelation of this truth brings out an image of his which Nora is unaware of. His burst out and accusation of Nora solely being responsible for this shows her the true nature of her husband who instead of being her knight in shining armor decides to settle the matter in a hush manner so that his reputation is in no way affected by her action. Right up to the final moment Nora clung to the notion of 'the miraculous,' to the dream that Helmer would come forward and take the whole accusation upon himself, saving her from being condemned by society.

Nora's illusory picture of her husband is broken revealing him to be a pitiable and egoistic slave of the male society. Once he discovers the truth about the loan and forgery, he further declares that "all your father's want of principle has come out in you. No religion, no morality, no sense of duty" (Ibsen 113). The first thought that enters his mind upon knowing the truth is that his future has been ruined due to her action instead of understanding her situation. The contrast in his personality is clearly visible in his way of addressing her. While his addresses to her are full of lovely endearments before knowing the truth, but the moment the truth is out the addresses change to 'miserable creature'; 'a hypocrite, a liar-worse, worse-a criminal!' (Ibsen 112).

Torvald voices the idea that one's parents determine one's moral character when he tells Nora, "Nearly all young criminals had lying - mothers" (Ibsen 52). He even forbids Nora from interacting with the children as he does not trust her anymore in teaching the children about righteousness and morality, instead he fears that she will corrupt them. This accusation of not being able to be a proper mother to her children is hilarious as the person accusing Nora of her crime has himself never shown any interest in his children's upbringing throughout the play.

Throughout the play Torvald appears to play the role of the better human who is morally and intellectually correct but in reality, he is a complex character who reflects the social norms and expectations of his time. He is quite rigid in his views of gender roles, expecting Nora to fulfill the traditional role of a wife and mother, and placing a great deal of importance on appearances and social norms. He plays the traditional male role in a household as provider. When he initially found out about Nora's loan, he was furious with her and only thought of how he could keep his reputation intact. He came to view what she did as an act of love, though misguided and ignorant. While Nora has kept herself consoled by the dream that Helmer will take upon himself the complete and full responsibility of her actions and will courageously shield her from the society condemning her, her illusory picture seems to be a part of some romantic and fantastical world. The real face of Helmer is that he is much less liberated than Nora herself. He is a pitiable and egoistic slave of the male

society which he highly defends. When he confronts Nora, it is not the human being in him which speaks but in reality, it is society, its institutions and authorities which speak through him.

Torvald: "I would not be a true man if your feminine helplessness did not make you doubly attractive in my eyes." (Ibsen 115)

The fact that Torvald sees a wife's complete dependence on her husband as attractive reveals that his love for Nora depends on her being ranked beneath him in both power and intellect. This highlights the fact that men always wish to be seen as a god-like figure whom women must worship and follow all their sayings. This fact also highlights the upbringing of the male species of those times, especially the Victorian times. An upbringing which showcased women as objects devoid of any feelings and emotions, objects meant to be kept under control. Many women writers have written about women's subjugation during the Victorian age and the age of industrialization. Charlotte Bronte's novel "Jane Eyre" (1847) is a powerful exploration of the limitations placed on women in Victorian society. George Elliot's novel "Middlemarch" is also a complex exploration of Victorian society and the subjugation of women within it. All these writers focus on the female character's struggle to find their place in a society that values them primarily for their appearance and marriageability.

IV. TRANSFORMATION OF NORA

This struggle to prove their worth can also be seen in the two female characters of this play "A Doll's House". Nora initially seems a silly, childish woman but as the play progresses, we see that she is intelligent, motivated and by the play's conclusion, a strong-willed, independent thinker. Mrs. Linde's character can be seen as a true image of the sufferings of women of those times. Women during those times were expected to get married, have children and stay at home to tend to their children and husband. When a woman started to work and earn some money to become self-sufficient, it caused genteel society like Torvald to find her "boring". Women had very few opportunities to make money for themselves and had to rely on husbands or fathers to provide for their needs. Without a father or older brothers, Mrs. Linde is forced to seek a rich husband leaving behind the man she truly loves in order to be financially secure. She sacrifices her love for Krogstad so that she can help her family without even knowing the true financial condition of her husband. Firstly, she had to sacrifice her love, later she sacrificed her younger days working odd jobs so that she could help her younger brothers get settled in life.

After fulfilling her obligation of being an elder sibling, she has to fulfill her filial obligations towards her sick mother, thus she undertook years of labor in order to tend to her mother. After her mother passed away, she is free of all her obligations to live life the way she wants. This shows that the women during those times were considered to be the sole person responsible for fulfilling their filial obligations towards their parents whereas the sons are not forced to fulfill their obligation as can be seen in the play. While Mrs. Linde is obligated to fulfill her duty as the daughter, there is no mention of her brothers fulfilling their duty as a son. Mrs. Linde mentioning that "my poor mother needs me no more" and "the boys do not need me either", shows the place occupied by women in the society. They are remembered only when there is a "need" for people to call them, otherwise a woman is not important to her parents or family. She is just an object who is seen as just a source of gaining

– whether be it gaining the marriage dowry by the husband or the family gaining their money and resources in bringing up a woman by making her fulfill her obligations to them. The women are also so in the habit of being used that doing the opposite makes them feel their life as unspeakably empty, just the same way as Mrs. Linde feels empty as there is “no one to live for anymore”(Ibsen 22).

Though Nora also has her obligations towards her father, she ignores it, choosing to be with – and sacrifice herself for – her sick husband instead of her sick father. Ibsen does not pass judgement on either woman's decision, but he does use the idea of a child's duty to their parent to demonstrate the complexity and reciprocal nature of familial obligations. Even though Nora does not fulfill her obligations towards her father but her character is also self-sacrificing in the sense that she abandons her children despite her great love for them – manifested by her interaction with them and her great fear of corrupting them. She chooses to leave them believing that the nanny will be a better mother and that leaving her children is in their best interest.

Henrik Ibsen also highlights the theme of reputation and marriage through the characters of the play. Reputation plays an important factor for the characters of Nora and Dr. Rank as their reputations hinge on the reputations of their parents. Dr. Rank's father had a reputation as a man who enjoyed carnal pleasures to such a damaging extent that he passed on a venereal disease to his son that eventually results in his death. Though Dr. Rank is an upstanding member of society, he is suffering for his father's misdeeds and pays the price by losing his life. Similarly, Torvald says that Nora's ability to spend carelessly is inherited from her father. Just as a child receives the last name of their father, the same way they inherit their father's reputation, no matter it being positive or negative. If a child's father had a bad reputation, it comes back to haunt them disregarding the goodwill or the character of their own. The importance of having a good reputation is the reason Helmer is highly against the idea of letting the world know of Nora's misdeed. His reaction on knowing that the danger is past, clearly indicates the importance of having a good reputation. The need to have a positive reputation is also indicated by the drastic step Krogstad takes of black-mailing Nora. The reason behind this act was to have a reputation positive enough for his children to live peacefully.

The play also gives insight into the marriage of two pairs: Nora and Torvald and the other pair is Krogstad and Mrs. Linde. While Nora and Torvald represent a marriage of convention, their lack of understanding towards each other is the main reason behind them going separate ways. In order to keep their conventional marriage afloat, Nora lies to Torvald about everything from eating macaroons to not telling him about the loan. Thus, the foundation of their married life is lies and deception. Torvald, as an orthodox husband, considers it his utmost right to control his wife as if he were controlling a doll. This right to control that Torvald recognizes as his birth-right, since being born as a male, is another reason for their marriage to fall apart as he is not able to come to terms with the fact that Nora has a thought-process of her own and will not follow his orders like a doll. In retrospect, the relationship shared by Krogstad and Mrs. Linde represents the marriage which Nora desired for. Mrs. Linde and Krogstad speak frankly to each other without having the need to hide any secrets from one another. This means that they see each other as equals unlike Nora and Torvald who had an unequal marriage with him, always being the superior one. While

Christine Linde needs a partner to spend her life with, Nora needs freedom from her marriage as she prefers individuality over the need for a partner.

Throughout the play, Nora struggles to prove her individuality and the fact that she can take reasonable decisions on her own. She has a duality of character which makes her appearance as a silly and childish woman, unreasonable. At the start of the play, Nora is seen as the perfect housewife who takes care of her husband, children, and home. She plays the role without any complaints, fulfilling every wish of her husband. Her character at the beginning of the play is shown as that of a carefree person who just has to fulfill her duties of being a wife and a mother without a worry about the finances of the house. The happiness that she has of her husband getting promoted is seen as the happiness of a wife on her husband's success. Her character is shown as that of a spendthrift wife who wastes the money of her husband to spend a splendid life in luxury without worrying about any problems other than those of the household.

But in reality, this carefree and dutiful personality of Nora is only a façade. All of it was just done to keep any doubt from seeping into Torvald's mind. The duality of her character is quite commendable. Mrs. Linde, her friend, has the notion that Nora knows "so little of the burdens and troubles of life" (Ibsen 23). This statement is the reason the readers get to know the truth of Nora's secret, which she has kept hidden from all. Every person thinks of Nora as a child and thinks that she is incapable of doing anything serious. Thus, when she reveals the fact that she had taken a loan of two hundred and fifty pounds on her own credit without anybody's help or without her husband's permission, Mrs. Linde is quite shocked to know of her deed and considers that she should tell the truth to Torvald.

V. CONCLUSION

While Nora is proud of saving her husband's life on her own, it is seen as imprudence by the other people. The readers also get to know the fact that the money which Torvald considers Nora has wasted was in reality used to pay the debt of the loan. Nora had even done a job of copying to earn money for her loan by lying to her husband that she was making decorations for Christmas. This shows that Nora has a strong presence of mind unlike what others think of her. The happiness which she felt on her husband getting promoted can be considered to be because of the fact that after his promotion her allowances and household budget would also be increased by him, and this increment would help her in paying the loan at a much faster pace. This shows that Nora was quite mature, then what people thought of her. This maturity, courage and presence of mind is the reason Torvald feels threatened by Nora.

The reaction that Torvald gives to her makes her realize the true personality of her husband which was hidden behind the garb of a loving and caring husband. Nora realizes that she was being continually conditioned by Helmer and had no life of her own. She comes to the realization that the person she identified as her husband was a complete stranger to her and she did not know him at all. She realizes that Torvald does not truly understand her or appreciate her as a person and thus she declares her intention of leaving him and their children in order to find her own identity and purpose in life. She at-last discerns that she was never happy in that house. She thought she was, but it had never really been so. She had just been a part of a playroom which was authorized and controlled by Helmer. She becomes

aware of the fact that she never really loved him and that she is not fit to be a wife and mother unless she knows about her own individuality. Thus, she goes away slamming the door of the house on her husband and children even though Torvald begs for her to stay.

As Nora discovers the futility of her idea where she considered Torvald as her savior, her mind becomes fully independent. As she acknowledges the constraints on her individual freedom, she is equally determined to cut off any ties with her husband. Thus, she grants him freedom wishing for him to become a person with a better personality. She holds a straw of hope for the changed Helmer implying to the fact that they might be able to meet in the future as two different individuals with their own independence and being equal in status.

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