

HENRIK IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE* AS A FEMINIST PLAY

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Abstract:

Henrik Ibsen was a prominent poet and dramatist of nineteenth century. He wrote many plays for the social cause. *A Doll's House* is also one of his influential plays, in which he raised a voice in favour of women. He sought equality for men and women, which he subsequently presented in this play through the character of Nora Helmer. The paper aims to analyse the play on feminist grounds. In this play, Nora seeks individuality and autonomous selfhood, which she acquires on terms of breaking the shackles of gender roles of mother and wife.

Key Words: *A Doll's House*; Feminist; Gender roles; Henrik Ibsen; Individuality.

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Henrik Johan Ibsen (1828-1906), a significant Norwegian poet and dramatist, is known as the most influential man of the theatre in the nineteenth century. He has been a source of great influence for many playwrights of the nineteenth as well as twentieth century. His influence on George Bernard Shaw is especially notable. It was the social drama or the drama of ideas which he particularly propagated. His major works are: *Love's Comedy*, *The Pretenders*, *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, *The League of Youth*, *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *Hedda Gabbler*, *The Master Builder*, *Little Eyolf*, *John Gabriel Borkman* and *When We Dead Awaken*.

The present paper is based on his mostly acclaimed play, *A Doll's House*. The paper intends to analyse whether this play is an articulation of feminist ideology or not. Written in the nineteenth century, the play outlines the women's realisation of their rights and their endeavour to search for their role in society. It is an effort by a woman to assert her individual self.

The play *A Doll's House* was written in the nineteenth century, when women were struggling for economic and social rights equal to men in society. Most of the women were act passively as they are expected to not to go outside their houses and child bearing and child rearing was their main role in family and they do not actively participate in society. In the words of Marianne Sturman, "In *A Doll's House*, he especially probed the problems of the social passivity assigned to women in a male-oriented society (2004, p. 51)". It was the time when men and women had been following the age-long traditions, as they were assigned specific roles to play.

The question, whether *A Doll's House* is a feminist play or not, depends on Ibsen's relationship to feminism. Gail Finny writes in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*:

The question of Ibsen's relationship to feminism, whether one is referring specifically to the turn-of-the-century women's movement or more generally to feminism as an ideology, has been a vexed one. The view supporting Ibsen as feminist can be seen to

lie along a spectrum of attitudes with Ibsen as quasi-socialist at one end and Ibsen as humanist at the other. (1994, p. 89)

As is clear from the above views, Ibsen has not been regarded a feminist writer, rather he is regarded a socialist and humanist. His advocacy for women's rights lies in his advocacy for equal treatment of them in society. He emphasises more on the equality for man and woman and women's struggle for identity. As Razieh Eslamie opines:

Nora attempts to show the journey of such a woman as she gradually comes to the conclusion that her life and identity are a lie, and her real needs and aspirations go beyond the bounds of her marriage. (2015, p. 100)

In fact, the play was written during a time when women were enslaved in their gender roles and where certain restrictions were enforced on them by male dominant culture. It was a system of patriarchy, in which every woman was raised believing that they had neither self-control nor self-government but that they must yield to the control of dominant male gender. In that society, men were individuals and wrote laws, prosecuted the criminals and judged women on their own point of view. Although Ibsen communicates strong ideas about women's rights, the play also contains issues of imprisonment of men in their role in patriarchal system and society. It is those rules and norms of society that are boldly questioned by Ibsen through the relationship of Torvald and Nora – the unequal power sharing of men and women. As Abdul Baseer remarks:

The society is a maledominated society where language is a tool in the hands of the dominating gender, and is utilized fully to create an impression of ruler and be ruled; possessor and possessed, supervisor and subservient. (2013, p. 626)

Another notable point is the anti-feminist language used by Helmer. He uses animal terms to refer to Nora, his wife, such as 'skylark', 'squirrel' and 'singing bird', which suggests that Helmer does not love Nora as an equal, and treats her like a pet. Even more, he calls her a 'possession', as if she were a thing and not an individual with a separate identity. His use of demeaning terms

highlights the society's norm of treating women as inferior. Moreover, Helmer is portrayed as having the powerful in their relationship as he controls all the money and gives it to Nora as gifts.

From a feministic perspective, the society of that time gives both the sexes stereotypical, social roles to play. It does not give them freedom to explore who they are and what they want to be. Nora and Helmer are faithfully conforming to their social roles. Nora, for example, fulfills the role of a dutiful wife and mother. She does not work and stays at home and takes care of the children. But she is not really fulfilled, or self-actualized, through this role. The role of wife and mother does not bring out all her potential. Her reminiscences about doing a bit of copying to pay off her debts, she feels: "it was almost being a man" (Ibsen, 2010, p. 18). She finds the experience "fun" (Ibsen, 2010, p. 18). She does it secretly because her role does not allow her to work like a man. It is, in fact, the negative effect of confining men and women to stereotypical roles. She is not suitable for the role of a good mother as the maids spend more time than her with the children and she only plays with them like "dolls" (Ibsen, 2010, p. 83). She is a suppressed woman because it is apparent from her conversation with Dr. Rank and Kristine that she is unable to say the word "Damn" in front of Torvald as it was considered extremely rude and vulgar in the society of that time.

Torvald Helmer, too, is a victim of society's expectations. He sees himself as bold and strong; social conditioning is responsible for his assuming of that identity. It is evident from his conversation with Nora that he wishes that she were in danger so that he could risk "everything" (Ibsen, 2010, p. 76) for her sake. However, when she is really in danger from Krogstad's blackmailing, Helmer proves himself only a coward and a selfish person. He is unable to fulfill the role assigned to him by society and he only shatters the stereotype of a perfect model husband.

Another aspect of the play from the feminist point of view is the economic dependency of women. The woman was not allowed to work even if she wanted; she had to depend upon her husband, father or son for money. The work of earning money was assigned to man and he used to do the same not because he loved his family, but as feeling proud of being the master and protector

of his family. He calls Nora a “spendthrift” (Ibsen, 2010, p. 5), to symbolize her weakness in contrast to his strength. Yet, Nora acts oppositely, having both the qualities of man and woman. In the words of Amir Hossain:

Ibsen, however, has carefully constructed Nora so that her independent and farsightedness might have always shown through her adolescent capriciousness. . . . This mixture of wisdom and childishness is Nora’s strongest quality. It enables her to oppose the knowledge of books and the doctrines of her worldly husband and to test by experience the social hypothesis which declares duty to the family is the most sacred.(2015, p. 12)

A comparison and contrast can be made between two women characters shown in the play. Nora and Kristine are the two models of womanhood in the nineteenth century as created by Ibsen. On the one hand, Nora is an uneducated, materialistic and impulsive woman. Kristine, on the other hand, is an independent and bold woman who had to work to save herself and her family. Nora is a dynamic character because her character develops. From a “little lark” (Ibsen, 2010, p. 43) who performs tricks for Torvald, she develops into an independently thinking woman who leaves her husband and children to find herself. Up to the end of the play, she seeks Torvald’s supervision to do little jobs like dance practice or selection of her ball dress. Kristine also has faced trials and tribulations in her life and she knows about the “hard world” (Ibsen, 2010, p. 14). She breaks the stereotypical mould that the society had fashioned for woman, that is to be docile and subservient objects of male attention. As Fatemeh Ghafourinia and Leila Baradaran Jamili write:

Nora resists and rejects the domestic role and acts in opposition to the social conventions and morals. The problem portrayed in the play is about women’s rights, as human’s rights. It is about the need for every woman to find out herself and stand on her feet in order to recognize the truth about herself, her life and her society. Moreover, it is about the need of every woman for self-discovery and acting based on

the truth even though that truth is opposed to the social acceptance and for fighting against social conventions in the search of the truth. (2014, p. 428)

As N. Eakambaram quotes about Nora's asserting her identity that "No appeal to books, religion, sanctity of family, or question of conscience can stop Nora from seeking her freedom and truth (2007, p. 5)". As Torvald also fails in playing his role of a protective husband, Ibsen thinks that it was necessary to make the society aware of their limited capacity to play their roles. He wants to say that these roles have been created initially only for convenience, not for compulsion.

Thus, it can be said that rather than writing solely for women's rights, Ibsen wrote to free both men and women who were trapped in their gender roles during this period. He saw that there was need to revolt against the conventions and moral issues of society and he demanded justice and freedom for every human being and he wanted to inspire society towards individualism and free them from suppression.

To conclude, the author has shown gender specific roles in the form of Nora-Torvald and Kristine-Krogstad relationships and pinched them to his advantage to illustrate the difference between conditional and absolute love. The play deals with the difficulty of maintaining an individual personality – the feminine personality – within the confines of a stereotyped social-role. Thus, the play can be called a feminist one as it articulates the female voice in the play and it aims at a woman's struggle for assertion.

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