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HARRY SULLIVAN'S THEORY OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS IN CHARACTERIZING NORA'S PERSONALITY IN HENRIK IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on the psychological aspects of the character of Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in the light of Harry Sullivan's theory of interpersonal relations, which focuses on human relationships and their role in the formation of human personality through its interactions with others. The paper's approach examines and interprets the different layers of Nora's personality and relationships and their significant impacts on her human psyche. Eventually, the paper deduces that Nora, despite her feminine projected character, is actually viewed as a strong-willed, supple, and ostentatious character, who decides for herself and defies social challenges and familial constraints.

Keywords: Harry Sullivan, Interpersonal Relations Theory, Personality, Nora, *A Doll's House*, Henrik Ibsen, Characterization.

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INTRODUCTION

In any drama, personality plays a vital role in characters' behaviors and actions to protect personal entity and psyche. The American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Harry S. Sullivan devoted his basic studies to analyze such concepts of human personality in various stages of life. For Sullivan, a "personality characteristic" is defined as the things which people can see, hear, and feel in their relationships with other individuals (14). This is the most fundamental working hypothesis in his personality theory. In this light, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* presents Nora with universal themes that characteristically raise the human question of women in the light of Sullivan's theory of interpersonal relations. Nora is a multilayered character whose interpersonal relationships are based on social and cultural features of her own personal identity. Sullivan's interpersonal theory is

still a valid approach to psychoanalyze Nora's character. Meanwhile, human personality is observable and develops mainly through interactions as it embodies itself in interpersonal bonds. This notion asserts that personality is measurable and evaluated through its interpersonal relationships and interactions with other persons over time.

This paper focuses on Nora's suggestive role based on her personal and interpersonal behaviors, actions, and relations based on Sullivan's concept of personality. Its approach draws on three main personality-based notions: interpersonal relationships, dynamisms, and reactive anxiety and tension. Human Personality is manifested in interpersonal situations in which such a personality is a "relatively enduring pattern of interpersonal situations which characterize a human life" (Sullivan 110–111). Thus, Sullivan stresses the significance of

the interpersonal relations and interactions to analyze human personality. Relevantly, Nora's behavior is controlled by personal subconscious drives and conflicting impulses. The Iranian scholar Noorbakhsh Hooti points out that "in 19th century, the most pivotal role of a woman was to stay at home, raise her children, and attend to her husband" (1109). Thus, Nora is the one who intimately plays these roles and pays the price. Again, this paper scrutinizes Nora's personality as a dynamic character through the idea of self-dynamics and the mental images of the self and other people. However, despite her interpersonal relationships and strong will, Nora cannot overstep Helmer's male power, as she is "deprived of her identity and dignity and has to be conformable to her husband's ideology" (Yuehua 81). As can be noted, interpersonal relationships control human personalities and guide them to certain ends. Nora is aware of power and need conflicts in her society; she tries to create her own image as a female with strong will and determination. The Iranian critic Razieh Eslamie argues that "the need to understand individuals within their social context" should be built on real personalities (97). In this sense, Nora's personality tardily transforms from a two-faceted character to a fully evolved woman who decides for herself and her family without any one's guidance. This is mainly suggested in her courageous independent management of the debt dilemma. Ibsen webs displaced and suggestive relationships with characters who again contribute to Nora's personality.

Moreover, Sullivan's concept of "dynamism" of human self is a vital pillar in his personality theory (15). In this sense, Nora's image of the self emerges from her interpersonal interactions as "a major instrument of socialization" to maintain her dignified personality (Evans 100). Remarkably, Nora's self gets inflated because of her social experiences with her close characters, mainly her husband, Helmer. Sullivan argues that each human has a system of self, whose power is "a conservative aspect of personality" which relies on human experiences (57). This self-system enables persons to "transform tensions into either covert or overt behaviors and is aimed at satisfying needs and

reducing anxiety" (Cuizon 2015). In this regard, Nora has this system to defend her position and actions and to relieve her internal tensions. For example, she tells Linde one day she will discover Helmer's true personality and "a time will come when Torvald is not as devoted to me, not quite so happy when I dance for him, and dress for him, and play with him" (Ibsen 161). Here, Nora shows her transformed personality and her intention to retain Helmer's faithfulness and devotion to her. This also shows that Nora has an insightful, intelligent, and manipulative mentality that signifies her troubled personality.

Ibsen's Characterization of Nora's Personality

In dramatic plays, personality plays an important role based on its relationships with other persons/characters. It affects and gets affected by the interpersonal relations that constitute the compass of characters' behaviors, identity, and future. In this sense, Ibsen's characters internalize images shaped in their interpersonal relations and actions; his dramatic characters have an intellectual fertile life of dramatic presence. This is the most fundamental working hypothesis in his personality theory. In this view, Nora is the major character around whom the events revolve and to whom other characters are complementary. Pertinently, the Bangladesh writer Shah Karim argues that "Nora's characteristics comply neither with Ibsen's contemporary women psychology nor with the modern ones" (22). Yet, she has common needs or concerns embedded in love, respect, dignity, freedom, and protection. These qualities characterize Nora's personality; she is a female of potential sacrifices in a masculine society.

In *A Doll's House*, Nora is a woman who constructs her interpersonal relationships in the light of her own vision and scheme. Nora's personality is evolved through her distinct interactions with other close characters such as Linde, Krogstad, Rank and Helmer, the husband. Nora tries to sustain her submissive role in her relationship with Helmer in order to achieve "a harmonious balance in her domestic life and a perfect control of her realm" (Yuehua 85). Seemingly, Nora's submissiveness is another dynamic trait of her personality. However, Nora's

personality has certain positive qualities such as being loving, caring and loyal to her husband. In this regard, the American critic Joan Templeton argues that “anyone who claims that in Nora Ibsen had in mind a silly, hysterical, or selfish woman is either ignoring or misrepresenting the plain truth that Ibsen admired, even adored, Nora” (124). Ibsen’s Nora is a theoretical preferable and realistic character whose personality guides, forms, and controls her own intentions, desires, and actions.

The first suggestive interpersonal interaction between Nora and Helmer is about money; she behaves in a submissive way to make Helmer give her more money. Further, Nora manipulates Dr Rank when drawing his attention to the way women are unequal partners in society. Implicitly, Nora recognizes that Helmer controls both money and the interpersonal relationships. Nora attempts to compete with him in taking control over money in their marriage experience. Nora’s willing to violate the law to save Helmer shows her courage outside the traditional role of women in human societies. On his part, Helmer’s selfish reaction on knowing the truth of Nora’s deception and forgery constitute a catalyst for her self-realization. However, Nora draws a deviant self-image of her true personality and starts to rebel for her own independence. Relevantly, Nora and Helmer are both “the representatives having origins in every locale and every time;” they live with “different colors and shades” (Karim 21). Thus, they both represent the spirit of modern humanity in every society, family, institution, and house.

Noticeably, Helmer considers Nora an extravagant woman who disposes money away from her family’s future. Helmer’s words confirm his initial image about Nora’s personality, “Nora! ... The same little featherhead! ... a slate fell on my head and killed me” (Ibsen 4). This is the impression that Helmer maintains about Nora due to her un-understandable behaviors and actions, mainly the issue of money and forging the signature. However, Nora herself asserts this image about her personality when she replies “I don’t suppose I should care whether I owed money or not” (Ibsen 9). However, Nora is keen to cryptically deal with that worrying mystery of money in a resourceful and intelligent.

Based on her interpersonal relationships, Nora thinks that the character who can manage her financial matters properly should have sufficient freedom. She justifies this attitude because money constitutes a major concern for her and will make her a happy character, especially that her husband has got a new job in the bank that would help in providing the necessary money to pay off the debt to Krogstad, Nora says,

Torvald has never been willing to do that, and I quite agree with him. You may imagine how pleased we are! He is to take up his work in the Bank, and then he will have a big salary and lots of commissions” (Ibsen 10).

So, Nora’s behavior is justified that she wants to save her husband and to acquire value and feeling of pride and satisfaction from which she derives new spirit and personality capable of creating a new reality. Besides, Nora struggles to defend her personality and gender pride by satisfying her own needs of self-respect and self-esteem. In this sense, Nora’s “gender norms actually lead to an unhappy ending on both relationship and individual levels,” a thing that dissatisfies her desires and needs of social, familial and personality stability (Karim 25). These psychological norms dominate Nora’s and Helmer’s relationships and affect their personalities. In this context, Eslamie states that Nora works on two major approaches to manage her conflicts, “one is compensation, the other is the development of the sense of superiority” (98). Nora tries to strengthen her personality by independent decisions, behaviors, and actions. Moreover, Nora presents her personality’s features in which she starts to weigh her relations with other characters, classifying them according to her pragmatic views into two categories. The first category includes what she adores and sacrifices for which is applicable to her interpersonal relationship with her father in her childhood and her husband now. The second category involves maids in her childhood and her family’s intimate friend Rank now with whom she talks and feels pleasure. She says to Rank, “there are some people one loves best, and others whom one would almost always rather have as companions” (Ibsen 47). Seemingly, Nora’s classification of others

is based on apparent interpersonal relations that are not built on mutual honesty; what guides Nora then is her internal and rooted social, familial, gender and dignity concerns.

Nora's identification of her character's features in the light of her interpersonal relationships with others is not built on real facts. Rather, it draws on unrealistic fantasies and mistaken interpretations. In the light of Sullivan's theory, Nora encounters two paths of psychological pressures. The first path arises from Krogstan's threat to reveal the fake signature. The second path arises from her fear of Helmer's misunderstanding of her sacrifice. This path generates Nora's excess anxiety and fear and hinders her plan to save her familial project and solve her haunting problems. Nate Cuizon (2015) distinguishes anxiety from fear; saying that anxiety "usually stems from complex interpersonal situations" and "has no positive value" that can lead to profitable actions. Ironically, after her sacrifice for her husband, children and house, Nora becomes a suspect in her husbands' eyes, who has never known that his treatment trip is on the expense of her reputation. She decides to admit her miscalculations and re-examine her life to give birth to a new human able to understand others in the light of realistic facts. She thinks that this new human with well-formed personality will be a real partner capable of building a better future.

In the light of this transformation, Nora becomes a revolution against the circumstances that women used to live in Europe. Nora's words evidently suggest this stance,

wonderful things don't happen every day
[...] But you neither think nor talk like the
man I could bind myself to. Exactly as
before, I was your little skylark, your doll,
which you would in future treat with
doubly gentle care, because it was so brittle
and fragile. (Ibsen 77-78)

Accordingly, Nora loses her intimate interpersonal relations with Helmer, in particular and with other characters in general. Also, Nora's sacrifice causes negative results; her husband describes her hurtfully ignoring the actual reasons for what she has done for him. These entire reasons make Nora rethink her

life; she realizes that her life becomes impossible with Helmer who becomes a strange man,

then it dawned upon me that for eight
years I had been living here with a strange
man, and had borne him three children ... I
can receive nothing from a stranger" (Ibsen
80).

These words center around the intellectual perception of people, this perception means the mental images and impressions left in the individual's memory through people's interpersonal relationships. In this sense, Nora forms mental images of the close persons and perceives each of them based on her personal experience. The American critic Duane Schultz argues that every image is "a goal, something to strive for, and as such, it reflects and leads the person" (169). Early, Nora thinks that Helmer is a personality characterized by particular qualities with which she can cope. In this respect, Sullivan conceptualizes the good and bad personality in the light of his "psychodynamic theory" of the growth of the human self, "the self-dynamism" (110-111). This dynamism is called "the self-system" which is a parameter of human personality structure, a security which is a means to protect persons from anxiety. In this regard, Schultz indicates, "individual traits are sufficient to explain personality" and make people behave congruently in various events. (240). Relevantly, Nora employs such a means to minimize her real and latent anxiety; she dances tarantella, eats macaroni and borrows money. Also, such practices suggest Nora's growing sense of strong and sustained personality. Hooti argues that Nora's psychological growth of personality leads to "self-recognition and self-identity," for which she resists docility and submissiveness (1108). This growth is manifested in Nora's words, "Is a wife not to be allowed to save her husband's life? I don't know much about law; but I am certain that there must be laws permitting such things as that" (Ibsen 29). Here, Nora logically argues about a huge philosophical problem: her perception of marriage and its world of ups and downs.

Furthermore, the self-system is a "conjunctive dynamism" and represses personality change (Sullivan 63). Human experiences are

“inconsistent with our self-system” that threatens human security and necessitates the use of security actions to “reduce interpersonal tensions.” (Sullivan 99). In this concern, Nora uses her own dynamics to protect not only herself but also her family, husband, and interpersonal relations and to maintain her interpersonal security that is vulnerable for a tragic end. The American critic Charles Bazerman asserts that it is “within these new interactions, through which experience and sense of the self may expand,” adding that “most people spend much time in security operations, keeping at bay the anxiety aroused by the variety of life” (180). Thus, Nora’s sense of insecurity and anxiety arises from the various threats and concerns she faces such as financial dilemma and forging her father’s signature. Sullivan states that anxiety is the major “disruptive force in interpersonal relations;” to face such an anxiety, he argues that dynamism is “a typical pattern of behavior,” which arises from either bodily needs or tensions (98).

Strikingly, Nora’s anxiety is a cognitive source of Bazerman’s analysis, “anxiety is a frequent accompaniment to life, ... that almost all people show some difficulties in living and cooperating with each other, and many have severe dysfunctions” (175). Thus, both Bazerman and Sullivan assert the significance of developing sufficient interpersonal relations and social interactions. In this light, Nora gets an adequate perception of her self in relations to others who take part in forming her personality. Accordingly, Nora defies various “values, taboos, anxieties, and insecurities” that haunt her entire life as a mother and a wife (Bazerman 180). Evidently, Nora feels differently of what she believes and sacrifices for her husband; she believes that he will be proud of her sacrifice for him. Eventually, events expose the true image of Nora’s husband, different of what she has drawn at the beginning of the play. Thus, Nora’s interactions with the external powers “consistently display the sectioned personality that she hopes to recover by leaving at the end of the play” (Rosni 2014). Based on her developed and sustained personality, Nora hysterically decides to leave Helmer’s house and children and shocks readers

who in turn blame her for this rush uncalculated step. Templeton says:

Ibsen does not separate Nora as mother from Nora as wife because he is identifying the whole source of her oppression, the belief in a ‘female nature’, an immutable thing in itself whose proper sphere is domestic wifhood and whose essence is maternity. Nora’s leaving is, in her husband’s words, ‘outrageous’ and ‘insane’ because it denies the purpose of her existence, a reproductive and serving one: ‘Before all else, you’re a wife and a mother’ (143)

The second character that governs the inter-relation-based events is Krogstad of whom Nora forms another mental image. Krogstad’s and Nora’s interpersonal relationship denotes certain significant traits of her personality. For instance, Nora shows certain cautions and fear toward Krogstad on the issue of money and the forged signature. Nora intentionally circumvents Krogstad by counterfeiting her father’s signature to save her husband. The American scholar Danielle Rosni (2014) views Nora’s image of Krogstad as “very logical and reasonable” that contradicts her behaviors towards Helmer, children, and Linde. This sort of interactive images contributes to Nora’s self-realization which depends on “the maximum realization and fulfillment of [human] potentials, talents, and abilities,” otherwise she will be anxious, depressed, and indignant (Schultz 307).

Furthermore, Linde is another character of whom Nora forms another sole mental image since boyhood; she is Nora’s classmate. Nora views Linde as her secrets’ keeper, so she tells Linde that the debt is a source of her sacrifice and pride from which she derives the spirit of altruism and satisfaction. This view suggests that Nora forms a good mental image of Linde and discloses many personal secrets to her, “Now I will show you that I too have something to be proud and glad of. It was I who saved Torvald’s life” (Ibsen 14). Yet, Linde does not value Nora’s confidence and acts to push events to an absurd end; she tries to let Helmer know the truth of the debt. She believes that disclosing this secret will help Nora and her husband to resolve

their dilemma. Ironically, this act may raise a surprise because Nora tries hard to keep this secret and to settle down the debt mystery before Helmer knows its truth.

Finally, Dr Rank is the fourth central character whom Nora views a trustworthy character, but she does not expect that he loves her. Nora realizes that he is her most faithful friend, "I know you are my truest and best friend [...] You know how devotedly, how inexpressibly deeply Torvald loves me; he would never for a moment hesitate to give his life for me. (Ibsen 45). Generally, Nora draws a certain mental image for each character with whom she deals according to the existing interpersonal relations. However, Nora's current mental images are unrealistic since her evaluation is solely subjective; therefore, these characters' realistic behaviors are in contrary to Nora's formulated images. Further, Rank realizes that Nora has a strong personality with independence in making decision. He also regards Nora as a deep sensitive woman with admired qualities as a wife. Further, Nora tries to make Rank help her even though the subject takes another dimension, she tells him, "know you are my truest and best friend, and so I will tell you what it is. Well, Doctor Rank, it is something you must help me to prevent" (Ibsen 45).

In terms of human anxiety, Sullivan believes that humans have a common desire to minimize their tensions. Nora experiences the "basic vulnerabilities to anxiety [manifested] in interpersonal relations" (Sullivan 11). No doubt, Nora's anxiety leads her create a range of ways to rid her own self of this anxiety. Nora uses the three dynamic mechanisms to distance the source of anxiety and tension, but these mechanisms have failed to rid her of anxiety. Rather, the successive events imply an escalation in Nora's tension due to Krogstad's constant threat of the letter if Helmer dismisses him from the bank. Consequently, Nora tries to draw accurate images of persons around to build "need-satisfying relationships" through a set of "defensive operations" and "self-security systems" (Bazerman 181). Such tense events and operations dominate Nora's life; she thinks that any person who approaches her house is Krogstad with the

letter in hand to drop in Helmer's mailbox. Nora's hegemonic anxiety imposes on her a specific life style in which she falls victim to her irksome thoughts that make her life a hell instead of managing this anxiety in a way that protects her personality and family. Despite being frivolous and egotist, Nora makes significant sacrifices to save Helmer's life and redeem her mysterious loan.

Initially, Nora accepts to be treated as a doll in Helmer's hands to get her own salvage and human identity. Helmer's maltreatment of Nora awakens her suppressed personality and weakens their relationship. Bazerman points out that human beings develop "action-oriented dynamisms" to achieve need satisfaction and distance any danger that prevents such achievements (180). Nora tries to distance Helmer from her anxiety's source, the box in which Krogstad's letter of debt is saved, by dancing Tarantella that he asks her to perform in a masquerade. Helmer notices that her life is dependent on this frivolous dance; he tells her, "My dear darling Nora, you are dancing as if your life depended on it [...] this is sheer madness" (Ibsen 55). Nora's dance is a mechanism that epitomizes her dramatic life with superficial delight and pleasure; yet, this dance suppresses the startling secret of debt. In this dance, Nora loses control of her motions and of her entire life and temporarily succeeds to distract Helmer from knowing the truth. This stance proves that Nora regains her feminine personality with which she defies Helmer's hegemony and oppression.

Throughout the play, Ibsen presents Nora with justifiable desires including self-esteem, gender equity, and human dignity to maintain her personality. Nora behaves out of unstable personality and presents "a vision of the need for a new-found freedom for women" (Hooti 1103). Nora is a self-sacrificial woman who fights to have a practical space for herself in a male-dominated community. Moreover, Ibsen introduces Nora with qualities of strong will, self-determination, and rooted faith in her duties and rights. Basically, one can agree that personality is "a hypothetical entity that cannot be isolated from interpersonal situations, and interpersonal behavior is all that can be observed as personality" (Sullivan 9). Sullivan

emphasizes the relational nature of personality and its dynamics to develop and maintain its identity. Undoubtedly, the structure of human personality contains interpersonal relations and means behaving in relation to a group of persons. For instance, Helmer's negative and suspicious attitude towards Krogstad's letter and Nora's attitude towards Linde's relations with Helmer and Rank are but true manifestations of such chaotic interrelations. In this view, the suggestive relationship between Nora and Rank offers a clue of the gap between her and Helmer. Nora tries to show her true personal self to Rank. Also, Nora's psychology is characterized with instability and anxiety caused by her subjective actions and attitudes towards others and by the circumstances that engulf other characters.

Noticeably, Nora's behaviors and actions are again dramatically subjective and result from the unrealistic perceptions that eventually put Nora face to face with the truth and take unprecedented sharp stance. Ibsen offers characters' "psychological tension" through their internal and external actions (Hooti 1106). This action-based tension generates various conflicts for Nora, who builds her actions and reactions on her own needs, desires, and dreams. To this extent, Schultz maintains that people set goals/needs to motivate them and to ensure "an optimal level of tension in the personality" (254). In this light, Nora faces such causes of her internalized tension; she needs to relax and sleep to forget part of her daily sufferings and pains and renew her soul and spirit of a dignified person. Accordingly, Ibsen intentionally presents Nora in such a way to shed light on modern human internal and external conflicts. Finally, Nora uses three pragmatic mechanisms to reduce her tension and anxiety that occur because of her uncalculated actions. Cuizon (2015) argues, "all felt tensions are at least partial distortions of reality;" these tensions arise from lack of needs or excess anxiety. In this view, Nora's needs compel her to do prompt actions such as forging her father's signature, while her anxiety leads to committing uncalculated behaviors such as dancing tarantella in an illogical mysterious way. Nevertheless, Nora can relieve or reduce such anxiety by maintaining

trustworthy interpersonal relationships with others to achieve "interpersonal security" (Sullivan 42). Eventually, Helmer's discovery of the truth of the debt makes Nora submit and lose her desire of resistance. Then, the familial-husband-wife relationship does not prevent her from keeping the secret for longer time. On his part, Helmer confesses that his marriage to Nora is but a big lie; his wife is a hypocrite, a liar and a forger, living with no morals and manners. As a result, Nora discovers that she is part of the social inter-personal web of relationships; she lives her state of estrangement and alienation. Nora manifests the fact that man can no longer live as a slave with inferiority, repression, and suppression.

CONCLUSION

The dynamics of Nora's personality are drawn on unrealistic beliefs that make Nora feel internal pride and satisfaction without accepting this feeling from others, especially Helmer. Ibsen introduces Nora's personality with qualities of strong will, self-determination, and rooted faith in her duties and rights. Moreover, Nora's classification of others is based on apparent interpersonal relations that are not built on mutual honesty. Sullivan emphasizes the interpersonal nature of personality and its dynamics to develop and maintain its identity. Also, Nora tries to employ her interpersonal relationships to give meaning to her personality and maintain her identity as a wife, a mother, and a female character. She decides for herself and does relevant actions to achieve her dreams and satisfy her desires in a stable and comfort family and house with dignity and respect. Nora's psychology is characterized with instability and anxiety caused by her subjective actions and attitudes towards others and by the circumstances that engulf other characters. Nora transforms into a deep personality through her interactions with other characters.

In addition, Nora's mental images of the characters are subjective and unreliable representations of the characters; her individual personality holds an impact on the construction of these images. Ibsen presents Nora full of action-based tension and anxiety to shed light on modern human internal and external conflicts. Finally, Nora

uses three specific pragmatic mechanisms to reduce her anxieties that arise from her uncalculated actions and bonds. Nora's needs force her to do commit actions such as forging her father's signature, while her anxiety leads to committing uncalculated behaviors such as dancing tarantella in an illogical mysterious way. Furthermore, Helmer's discovery of the truth of debt makes Nora submit and lose her desire of resistance. Nora discovers that she is part of the social interpersonal web of relationships; she lives her state of estrangement and alienation. She also decides to leave the dress of a doll and live as a human being with dignity and esteem. She never seriously and realistically thinks of radical solutions to her problems, a thing that intensifies her anxiety and leads to her inevitable tragic end.

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