

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## FEMINIST STUDY OF HENRIK IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on the feminist study of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Henrik Ibsen was a well-known poet and dramatist of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most of his plays are written for the social cause. This play is also one of his influential plays where he had also raised his voice in favour of women. The paper explores of how and to what degree Ibsen, one who is mostly famous for his dramas and too been credited for his feminist characters and contact with the women's cause by referring to his speeches and acquaintance. His notion for the equality is presented subsequently in this play through the character of Nora Helmer. The paper concludes with the justification to show how Henrik Ibsen through his female characters had challenged the stereotypical representation of women in literature.

**Keywords:** Feminist, Stereotypical, Acquaintance.

### INTRODUCTION

Feminist literary theory, as a term, gained currency during the mid-1980's, the term feminist literary criticism had previously been applied. Conventionally, criticism was used to refer to a practical approach to literary study, i.e. the close reading of texts; while theory referred to the interpretation, evaluation and examination of the philosophical and political underpinnings of the texts. Today, criticism and theory appear simultaneously in feminist anthologies and the feminist literary theory includes both, practical and theoretical, approaches to literature (*Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*, 261). As mentioned by Code, the function of the feminist literary theory is "analys[ing] the role that literary forms and practices, together with the discourses of literary criticism and theory, play in perpetuating or challenging hierarchies of gender, class, race and sexuality" (273). Wallace states that "feminist literary theory, then, engages with the political and social goals of feminism, and it concentrates on literary culture and theory as a possible site of

struggle and as a means of eventual change" (vii). Cuddon defines feminist criticism as:

A development and movement in critical theory and in the evaluation of literature which was well under way by the late 1960s and which has burgeoned steadily since. It is an attempt to describe and interpret (and reinterpret) women's experience as depicted in various kinds of literature- especially the novel; and, to a lesser extent, poetry and drama. (*The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 351)

*A Doll's House* is not only one of Henrik Ibsen's famous plays but also a great contribution to feminist literature even though the characters do not seem very outstanding at first sight. Ibsen never explicitly identified himself as a feminist but some of his speeches and acquaintances prove that he was concerned with the women's cause; this is also proven by his play's development and characters. Usually a lot of credit and attention is given to the protagonist, Nora, who is more or less the epitome of a modern woman when it comes to choice and

behavior by the end of the third and final act. This study will not only focus on her but also the other characters, be it male or female, and how they have contributed to the play.

Further, it will explore how Ibsen challenged the public/private split of society and the common belief that a woman's activity in the male-dominated public sphere will result in her depravity. It will also discuss how Ibsen portrays the contrasting fate of couples whose marriage is either based on equality of both spouses or the dominance of the husband and suppression of the wife.

### **DISCUSSION**

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" (*Cliffnotes: Ibsen's A Doll's House and Hedda Gabler*, 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,

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. (*The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, 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 bound the bounds of her marriage. (*A Doll's House: Journal of Scientific Research and Development*, 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 criminal 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 male dominated 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. (*The Use of Symbolic Language in Ibsen's A Doll's House*, 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'. She finds the experience 'fun'. She does it secretly because her role does not allow her to work like man. It is, in fact, the negative effects 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'. 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 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' for her sake. However, when she is really in danger from Krogstad's blackmailing, Helmer proves himself only shatters the stereotype of a perfect model husband.

Farrell argues that the division of society into public/private spheres gave husband and wife "distinct, but complementary, functions to perform" (*Separate Spheres: Victorian Constructions of Gender in Great Expectations*, 46). It is also mentioned that the women did more than just care of the house and the children; women functioned as moral and religious guides for their husbands as well. The public sphere was considered amoral and he only way through their wives who kept the home pure (54). Women who fail in keeping themselves and their family untainted are to blame when their offspring turns out bad. Torvald even remarks that 'almost everyone who has gone to the bad early in

the life has had a deceitful mother'. Furthermore, after Torvald finds out about Nora's crime, he threatens 'to not allow {her} to bring up the children' for he does not dare to 'trust them to {her}'. This division put(s) women on a pedestal but also in a cage or in this play's case a doll's house. Towards the end of the play Nora realizes that their 'home has been nothing but a playroom'; she was only her husband's 'doll-wife' and previously had been her father's 'doll-child'. She had 'merely existed to perform tricks' for her husband.

As mentioned earlier, Gilbert and Gubar identified "the angel of the home" and "the mad woman in the attic" as the main stereotypical images of women in literature (*Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, 177). They note that the "monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy" and that "the monster may not only be concealed behind the angel, she may actually turn out to reside within {...} the angel" (*Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 155). Oddly, the female characters of *A Doll's House* are betwixt and between those two images. Mrs. Linde had to work in the public sphere after her husband's death to support her family. She remarks that she 'could not endure life without work' but after her mother had passed away and her two young brothers had grown up, she felt 'quiet alone the world' and realized that there was 'not the least pleasure in working for one's self'. She wants 'to be a mother for someone'; that is, despite her independence she long for a family and traditional role of 'the angel of the home'. She is selfless and ready to put her own happiness aside for the sake of the ones she loves (characteristics that would suit an 'angel'). This is proven by her marriage to a wealthy man only for the sake of being able to provide for her sick mother and two young brothers; she did not marry him because she is a materialist. On the contrary, she cannot comprehend Nora's excitement about Torvald's promotion and believes that it 'would be delightful to have what one needs'; apparently, she is not interested in 'heaps and heaps of money'.

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', 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. (*Re-interpreting A Doll's House through Post-Modernist Feminist Projections*, 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' 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'. 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 and acceptance and for fighting against social conventions in the search of the truth. (*The Women's Right in Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House*, 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" (*Naturalism in Drama and Ibsen's A Doll's House*, 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.

## CONCLUSION

At first glance, *A Doll's House* does not seem very feminist, but as the plot unfolds and moves towards its climax, the play challenges contemporary misconceptions about women and the protagonist Nora transforms from a doll, a possession, whose sole purpose is to entertain her husband, into an individual human being. To conclude, the author has shown gender specific roles in the form of Nora-Torvald and Kristine-Krogstad relationship 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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