



HUSBAND-WIFE RELATIONSHIP IN “A DOLL’S HOUSE”: AN AFTERMATH OF MAN’S AUTHORITY OVER WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

Henrik Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House” touches one of the burning topics – woman’s place in stereotype society. Nora, the model character of this play, is captivated like a caged bird within a male dominated society whose outburst of her conjugal life is the outcome of her predicament on account of the excessive control exercised by her husband, Torvald Helmer. In course of time, she undergoes a sudden change and development from her doll-like existence to a rebellious, self-aware woman; from her servant-like position to autonomy; from her wrapped-up beautiful life to an independent life. This article is designed to seek answers of some questions regarding man-woman relationships: what exactly is the position or status of a woman in relation to man? What should be the basis of human rapport? Is woman really subservient to man by marriage which is solely a wedlock relationship but nothing more?

Key words: Marriage, society, oppression, husband-wife relationship, superiority, inferiority, individuality

In “A Doll’s House”, Henrik Ibsen reveals himself as a social realist with a sense of commitment. He has provided contemporary ailments of the society, pressing social conventions and customs, the fanaticism of organized religion, the defective ideas of marriage, and the oppressive ways of practice depicting human attitudes towards standard principles, social norms, and family values in his dramas. All these social ills are exercised to devalue and fetter the freedom of one class in society and that is woman. The underlying picture of the oppression of male characters, the sad outcome and sufferings of a subordinate woman, and then, her progression leading to come out from that created world are portrayed in this play whereas Nora Helmer is clothed by Ibsen as oppressed character and Torvald as a representative of male

dominated society. Nora finds difficulty in maintaining her individual liberty for Helmer who was an enigmatic personality, full of vanity, authority, and effrontery. The superior attitude Helmer adopts is exercised upon Nora whom he controls and treats as his property. The relationship between Helmer and Nora as husband and wife is depicted in “A doll’s House” in such a way that husband is the caretaker, wife the pet; husband the dominant figure, wife dominated; husband the free agent, wife captivated; husband the decision maker and wife the servant which, from feministic point of view, are not supportable rather the violation of human right. Keeping an eye to the aforesaid statements, the play can be elevated as a feminist play since feminism is defined in “A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory”:

“Throughout its long history, feminism has sought to disturb the complacent certainties of such a patriarchal culture, to assert a belief in sexual equality, and to eradicate sexist domination in transforming society.”

In “A Doll’s House”, Ibsen’s dialogues, monologues, and sequences in this play create a visible atmosphere to reveal a crucial truth regarding woman’s insight, manner, desire, urge, and dignity by the character of Nora Helmer. The writer depicts the problems of conserving woman’s individuality as the barrier of maintaining ethereal relationship between husband and wife and indicates what might be the possible outcome of such relationship existed between Nora and Helmer leaving a solution that equal participation of husband and wife in family life leads to stability and progress in every aspect of life. In this connection, Afif A. Tabbarah in his “The Spirit of Islam” says:

“The family is the nucleus of the human community, and family stability leads to social stability and progress. Since the family consists basically of husband and wife, the family stability and well- being depend largely on how well each one of the two knows where he stands, and how firm his relation with his partner is.”

In this play, Nora alone took a concerted attempt at first to force the merriment and ecstasy to continue in her marital life with the idea of relativity in life. As a loving mate and a model of wifely devotion, Nora possesses all the virtues-love, loyalty, amity, fidelity, commitment which are pre-requisite to maintain a healthy relationship between husband and wife. She tries to get on with her husband being a willing participant in her dysfunctional relationship, and seems to be completely happy staying in her subordinate role. Her furnished house, clapping of hands, playing with children, simple confession, satisfaction about her husband’s power and money- all highlight her lovely marital life which was nothing but the outcome of her semi-consciousness about her position and utmost endeavor to fill her conjugal life with cheerfulness, jollity, and ebullience. She appears as Helmer’s child-like persona as she responds

affectionately to her husband’s teasing, speaks with excitement, and takes pleasure in the company of her children and friends. Actually, she was not unaware that her life was at odds with her true personality but she enthusiastically danced by the movement of her husband’s will-wire instead of being treated by him as equals. The greatest sacrifice which exceeds Nora’s all dedication was her valiant step to go abroad to save her husband’s life at the time of his illness by borrowing money secretly in a forged manner and to pay that money with hard labor. All her floating and vivacious actions to run her family swimmingly have come from the power of love, keenness, integrity, and faithfulness; the pillars of successful marriage.

The play deals with oppression or domination to woman, stressing on individuality of woman, fighting for freedom, protesting to all restrictions of society. As husband, Helmer plays social role regarding Nora as a captive lady and claiming his right to dominance over Nora who, by the virtue of bashfulness, diffidence, and sobriety, endures Helmer’s awkward and uncouth manner, social bullying, and economical intimidation. Helmer’s domination surpasses everything in Nora’s life - public and private spheres, trivial and grave matters which he enwrapped with immature pattern of love. His fabricated love is personified as doll in which she is coddled, pampered, patronized, protected, petted, patted, dressed up, and given pocket money; but she is not allowed to cross a boundary wall made by her husband and to be herself. Mary Wollstonecraft in “Vindication of the rights of woman” “argued that women were the slaves of men, but immediately added that slavery degrades both master and slave. Married women are memorably described as birds ‘confined to their cages’ with ‘nothing to do but plume themselves’.” Accordingly, Helmer has created a world in which he is the dictator and Nora, a follower; he is the joy maker and Nora, the instrument of his amusement; he is the player and Nora, his doll which can’t be the sole idea of marriage since marriage, though accomplished by some external rituals, is an internal commitment between husband and wife to be stayed in harmonious and peaceful environment.

Marriage is idealized as sacred and sanctified relationship between husband and wife besides spousal relationship for which love, trust, respect, mutual truth, understanding, and reciprocated dealings are coercive. Marriage is defined by Gordon B. Hinckley as "Marriage, in its truest sense, is a partnership of equals, with neither exercising dominion over the other, but, rather, with each encouraging and assisting the other in whatever responsibilities and aspirations he or she might have." The solemnity and devoutness of marriage persists in husband-wife relationship when they thrive as soul mates, exceeds corporeal urge and reaches to spirituality, and enjoys ceaseless and eternal company of each other. Gary Thomas in his "Sacred Marriage" stated about the consecrated aspect of marriage:

"God did not create marriage just to give us a pleasant means of repopulating the world and providing a steady societal institution for the benefit of humanity; he planted marriage among humans as another signpost pointing to his own eternal, spiritual existence".

In this play, the deficiency of the above-mentioned values has made Nora and Helmer's matrimonial relationship futile. Nora, in her baleful marital life, has no liberty of her own, finds no self identity to expose her, and has no chance to express her own will, wish, and opinion; but has received only hostile reaction of Helmer in unpropitious atmosphere. To her husband, she is not more than a lark whose twittering pleases him, not more than a squirrel whose swiftness charms him. He treats her as his pet and possession because he loved her, but not respected; he cherished her, but not gave any freedom. Helmer says:

"I am not to look at my dearest treasure? – at the loveliness that is mine, mine only, wholly and entirely mine?" (Act-III, P-98)

Helmer's possessiveness and Nora's predicament equalizes with the condition of Duchess in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" in which Duchess embraces death being victimized by the arrogance of her husband. Duchess' innocence was not esteemed by him just like Nora as both of them couldn't enjoy a sheltered and care-free life

but Duchess is freed by her death whereas Nora is freed by her realization. In a monologue, The Duke says:

"----- oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed
without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave
commands;
Then all smiles stopped together."

Scarceness of mutual understanding, trust, and belief breed fickleness, inconstancy, and faithlessness which pervade among husband and wife in such a way that their conscious minds are followed by semi-consciousness jumping from strong belief to distrust and sometimes from unreliability to great confidence upon each other. In this play, Nora performs her duty idyllically accompanied with a belief that he is a broad-shouldered person to take all the things upon his shoulder and will be a fellow sufferer standing beside her in all problems which was once deceitfully and fallaciously strengthened by the words of her husband:

"Do you know, Nora, I often wish some danger might threaten you, that I might risk body and soul, and everything, everything, for your dear sake." Act-III, P-105)

But, Helmer, a double standard personality, falsifies his promise, and regards Nora's act a repugnant crime of forgery and an ignoble task, but not the outcome of her unadulterated love and an elegant sacrifice for him. He comments:

"During all these eight years- she who was my pride and my joy- a hypocrite, a liar- worse, worse- a criminal. Oh! The hideousness of it! Ugh! Ugh!" (Act-III, P- 107)

Similarly, Nora also expresses her reliance upon Helmer on which she herself had partial acceptance:

"If my husband gets to know about it, he will of course pay you off at once, and then we'll have nothing more to do with you." (Act-I, P- 37)

Conversely, she was always angst-ridden about the disclosure of the matter to Helmer and exposed her comment about him after her awakened and newly developed individuality:

“Torvald, in that moment it burst upon me, that I had been living here these eight years with a strange man, and had borne him three children –oh! I can’t bear to think of it- I could tear myself to pieces!”(Act-III, P-120)

Marriage is such a relation or bond in which the relationship between husband and wife in their marital life is not based on fear or trepidation, but a relation of sharing; and an ideal husband becomes the companion of his wife’s weal and woe. Francis Bacon in his “Of Marriage and Single Life” regards marriage as a highly-esteemed affair, and emphasizes to married life as preferable to single life. He treats wife as husband’s constant and bona fide companion when he says:

“Wives are young men’s mistresses; companions for middle age; and old men’s nurses.”

In this play, Nora, as a sincere company, prioritizes Helmer’s likes and dislikes, cares his taste, values his temperament, and takes self-imposed burden upon her to keep him happy all the time which creates fear, tension, and mental agony in her. To esteem Helmer’s preference, Nora fearfully cloaked her ill-gotten loan from him, and even, thought of putting an end to her life because of the crisis she was facing since Helmer was too intractable to ever borrow money, even at the cost of his own life which thwarts to maintain an excellent relationship between them. It becomes crystal clear in Mrs. Linde’s judicious statement when she comments on the unrevealed action of Nora:

“Helmer must know everything; there must be an end to this unhappy secret. These two must come to a full understanding. They can’t possibly go on with all these shifts and concealments.”(Act-III, PP-92-93)

Their relationship is portrayed in this play in such a way that the boastful adventure of Nora for her husband could not gladden him, but proved

embarrassing to him; and possessing Nora, a priceless matter of pride to Helmer for her stunning and peerless prettiness, good dancing, and singing, was also undignified for Nora. As their relationship is based on splendor, magnificence, and attractiveness; Nora has terrified apprehension that it would get its end one day. She says to Mrs. Linde about their distant and ceremonious relationship:

“Yes, sometime perhaps- after many years, when I’m – not so pretty. You mustn’t laugh at me. Of course I mean when Torvald is not so much in love with me as he is now; when it doesn’t amuse him any longer to see me skipping about, and dressing up and acting. Then it might do well to have something in reserve.”(Act-I, P-21)

We see the dearth of booming relationship in Leo Tolstoy’s “Anna Karenina” in which Alexei Karenin, a neither passionate nor emotional husband, but cold, calculating, and a stickler for social decorum, passed his connubial life with Anna with disrelish. Likewise, Helmer portrayed by Ibsen as rational, imperious, emotionally cold, self-centered, a worshipper of politesse, and a cynic of the aforesaid values willingly chained himself to the fetters of inflexible social system, legal complications, and public scandal which resulted despondence, discontentment, and unhappiness in them. Tolstoy in the very first line of “Anna Karenina” emphasizes on the common basic elements of happy conjugal life on which celestial happiness depends:

“Happy families are all alike; but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

The play draws our attention indicating the bases of man-woman relationship as well as the position of woman to man. Nora’s superficial attitude in understanding life and relationships, her initiative to help her husband, Helmer’s concern with external appearances and respectability than maintaining an excellent façade and inner happiness - those are actions and motives by which they wanted to continue their relationship, but not common facts or core reasons or virtues which result an advantageous and fruitful exactness in husband-wife relationship. Whereas reverence, as the super

virtue, integrates other qualities - mutual understanding, truth, faith, and love which are the pre-conditions of a happy family, Helmer shows his disrespectful tendency to Nora excluding her not only from public life, but from private sphere; suspecting her managing capacity; her handling financial system; and even, rearing children at the end. Helmer's impoliteness and disrespect refrains him from having high opinion about Nora's father though mutual respect includes the flesh and blood of each side. Helmer unleashes his disgust towards Nora:

"You're a strange little being! Just like your father- always eager to get hold of money, but the moment you have it, it seems to slip through your fingers; you never know what becomes of it. Well, one must take you as you are. It's in the blood. Yes, Nora, that sort of thing is inherited." (Act-I, P- 7)

Likewise, lack of respect, contempt, and disregard between husband and wife are manifested in Congreve's "The way of the world" as illicit love affair, adulterous relation, false wooing and courtship, the desire for divorce, marriage for the sake of money and wealth operate as motives behind estrangement between husband and wife. Ultimately, many vices – immorality, faithlessness, fakery, conspiracy, intrigue, and falsehood prevail among husband and wife. Mr. Fainall disrespectfully expresses his hatred towards his wife:

"I'll hate my wife yet more, damn her, I'll part with her, rob her of all she's worth, and we'll retire somewhere, anywhere, to another world, I'll marry thee."

The writer portrays a social panorama about the visible distinction between woman and man unveiling the differentiated features of woman and man's job, role, function, attitude, and opinion made by society, law, and system which is also responsible for vainness in family life. Borrowing money, allowing sinful act, sacrificing choice or opinion, and risking life as a sign of devotion in any difficulties are woman's duty only as they are lesser human beings whereas men, as superior beings, symbolize earning money, applying power, right to forgive, self- pride, having bigoted opinion, and being reserved with his

own personal world which generate nothing, but men's ill-treatment towards woman. The cause of man's ill-treatment towards woman is depicted in "Islam and Gender: The Bangladesh Perspective":

"The idea of gender injustice does not descent from the sky. The ideological foundation of oppression of women by men- and in some cases by women themselves- is the wrong belief that, compared to men, women are lesser human beings, that their quality as human beings is poor and that they are low in value and status. This belief, however, has been subconsciously internalized by a great number of women too. It develops in the minds of men because of some doubts and misgivings. And this false belief is the root cause of negligence, deprivation and oppression of women."

As the exposure of superiority, Helmer, throughout the whole play, scolds Nora, behaves rudely, treats her as a nullity, an inferior being, and a second hand creature by his addressing, action, and imposed opinion. Additionally, he belittles Nora thinking her as a person of having silly things, but not serious matters when he says: "Bless me! Little Nora talking about scientific investigations!" (Act-III, P- 100), and consequently, there was no significant discussion held between them which is revealed by Nora's self-awakening question: "Does it not strike you that this is the first time we two, you and I, man and wife, have talked together seriously?" (Act-III, P- 113)

Actually, Helmer was self-centeredly busy with himself and in his study like an isolated island having no communication and interaction with his wife and children which spoils strong relationship and helps to build a fleeting and evanescent life. In response to it, Nora, as a titular head of the family, replies good-naturedly to his criticism, behaves playfully yet obediently in his presence, and always coaxes favors from him. Nora, though accepted her assigned subordinate role, expected to lead a manlike life of freedom and supremacy which she candidly confesses to Mrs. Linde:

"And yet it was splendid to work in that way and earn money. I almost felt as if I was a man."(Act-I, P-22)

Helmer's pride resists him from considering Krogstad's case of Nora. Rather, he speaks like a superior repudiating her. Also, the reason of Nora's concealing the source of money was a matter of his superior feeling - pride. Nora comments:

"Good Heavens! What can you be thinking of? Tell him, when he has such a loathing of debt? And besides- how painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly self-reliance, to know that he owed anything to me! It would utterly upset the relation between us; our beautiful, happy home would never again be what it is." (Act-I, P-21)

Eventually, Helmer's final reaction, after learning the fact, proves his preeminence, primacy when he not only violated the right of his wife but also his reprimand and censure towards Nora crossed the boundary of human right:

"As for ourselves, we must live as we have always done; but of course, only in the eyes of the world. Of course, you will continue to live here. But the children cannot be left in your care. I dare not trust them to you-----" (Act-III, P- 108)

In this play, the writer throws light on social norms, conventional rules, and ideas of marriage which hesitate to give woman a position in both the family and the society at large to be respected and treated affectionately by her husband and defectively mould the faulty relationship between husband and wife. A woman in exclusively male society can't survive creating an anti-male idealism, setting herself in place of man or protesting the custom or rules settled by man. In this masculine society, man is the maker of laws and woman is the field of their experimentation in which they are judged by those laws though they are not given equal honour, appreciation, and liberty: "It is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men and with counsel and judges, who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view." All social instructions and conventions are constructed in such a way that woman is under the control of invisible hands and the pressure of patriarchal society where there is no emotion for them but rigid morality, system, and discipline. Eventually, when Helmer is

informed about Nora's act, he has made her religion, social laws and morality questionable:

"All your father's dishonesty-be silent! I say your father's dishonesty you have inherited--no religion, no morality, no sense of duty." (Act-III, P-107)

In such a system of society, a wife or a woman in general like Nora is in between natural feeling and belief in authority, and also becomes perplexed what is wrong or what is right for her. Nora once says to Helmer:

"I must make up my mind which is right--- society or I." (Act-III, P-118)

As social customs and conventions do not allow her to have a deep and serious share in her personal life, she relies on either escapist dream or petty subterfuges or any miracle to adjust to her situation by the frivolity, romanticizing, occasional lying or she makes any blunder for any cause which is not carefully measured but considered as a crime to be penalized. Helmer's selfish reaction to Nora's deception and forgery indicates Helmer's law which puts a man in much superior position in every field-economical, social, political etc. and regards her deed as an unthinkable action by a middle-class woman in ordinary circumstance. In "wuthering Heights", Catherine like Nora became the prey of male dominated society. She repressed her own impulses by descending into self-denial, self-rejection, self-starvation, madness, death, and loss of power by accepting a man as her husband who was the embodiment of patriarchal principle. She also had to yield to the social system which does not let a woman go with her own preferences. Peter Barry in his "Beginning Theory" quotes the comment of Gilbert and Gubar:

"What Catherine, or any girl, must learn is that she does not know her own name, and therefore cannot know either who she is or whom she is destined to be."

Peter Barry also gave the account of Gilbert and Gubar about the blemished marriage system:

"The marriage 'inexorably locks her into a social system which denies her autonomy..."

Nora's transition from enthralling life to colorless and flagging life by Helmer's rebuff to succor surrounds intolerable pain, wretched condition, and cloudy environment, but helps her also to perceive own caliber and potentiality. Her compromise which goes beyond her ability proves that she is not incapable and inferior to her husband. Her business deals related to the debt she incurred taking out a loan to preserve Helmer's health indicates that she is intelligent and possesses capacities beyond more wifehood. Her power of enduring secret labour, undertaking a duty to pay off debt shows fierce determination and ambition. Additionally, the fact that she was willing to break the law in order to ensure Helmer's health shows her courage. Basically, Helmer's extra-possessiveness and over-controlling attitude attempts to count her as shoddier and look upon him as superior which is apparent in his own words:

"But do you think I love you the less for your helplessness? No, no, only lean on me. I will counsel and guide you. I should be no true man if this very womanly helplessness did not make you doubly dear in my eyes." (Act-III, P-110)

Helmer's comments about Nora that she is intellectually inferior possessing debilitated body and feeble mind because of her womanhood proved him that he is psychologically gutless. His anxiety for pride, atrociousness after divulgement of the secret news made him an ill-natured person suffering from incurable mental narrowness than his physical illness. He shakes off his superiority and becomes a decaying, helpless husband when Nora changes from fragile and helpless woman to a potential, brave wife at the end. Nora finally shows her unfulfilled and underappreciated potentiality against Helmer's spiteful reaction which functions as the catalyst for awakening Nora's dormant personality and also, her epiphany that she has been putting on a show by her literal dancing and singing tricks. She realized that she had been gay but not happy through her marriage. Nora, in her note, comments that their marriage is nothing but a playful game:

"I thought it fun when you played with me, just as the children did when I played with them.

That has been our marriage, Torvalds."(Act-III, P-115)

Eventually, Nora, with her shaken belief and broken faith, abandons her family, so-called society, religion, and law which are thorny, convoluted, intricate and long-winded for woman; deserts conventional ways of marriage, law, system; and kicks at the ways the women are treated by male persons and as the new woman of modern age stages revolution against male instinct of possessiveness and treating woman as man's property. She says:

"I know nothing but what our clergyman told me when I was confirmed. He explained that religion was this and that. When I get away from here and stand alone, I will look into that matter too. I will see whether what he taught me is true, or, at any rate, whether it is true for me." (Act-III, P-117)

Her mutinous effort inspires to step into a strange unknown world to quest her individuality by understanding of herself and the things around her and also the meaning of real marriage. During her climactic confrontation to Helmer, Nora says that a miracle of miracles will happen when they change themselves reaching the point of real marriage:

"That communion between us shall be a marriage. Good- bye."(Act-III, P-123)

Last but not the least, "A doll's House" assembles universal issues of male-female relationship presenting the story of a husband and wife. Nora and Helmer are not mere individuals rather they are representatives of a typical, very frequently seen relationship between spouses in our today's world. Through the play, the writer wants to divulge that if a woman is not allowed to establish her own identity and develop her own individuality in her family and if the pillars of marriage are not nurtured by husband and wife carefully, their marriage proves to be an illusion, and cannot give a sheltered and secured life for them. In man-woman relationship through the institution of marriage, Woman and man are no longer in a relation of superiority or inferiority but they are auxiliary of each other conceiving equal right and self-respect. In "Woman in Islamic Shariah" Maulana Wahiuddin

Khan comments on the respective position of woman and man:

“Making man the maintainer in no way indicates that man is superior to woman. This choice is based on man’s capacities for management rather than on his superiority. In a democratic system, everyone has been granted an equal status yet when a government is formed, one particular individual is entrusted with supreme political power. This does not mean that this possessor of power is superior to other citizens. In a democratic system, the president or the prime minister has one vote like all the other citizens. Even then, in the interest of good management authority is entrusted to a single individual.”

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