

THE QUESTION OF WOMEN EMANCIPATION AND LIBERATION IN IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

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In the early versions of *A Doll's house*, the female protagonist was presented as a victimized woman, dichotomized in terms of male and female prerogatives. The first draft of the play looks at the affair with male eyes. Nora is thus a relational being incapable of developing beyond the one dimensional male chauvinistic outlook. In the final December 1879 version, however, Nora emerged as an ambiguous woman with a potential to revolt and assume an uncompromising attitude. Nora's transformation in the revised text marks the evolution of new woman and the play emerged as a project on woman experience. According to Harold Clurman, Ibsen provides insights into the deeper Nora, concealed in the flighty and fibbing doll. Naturally, the text has been subjected to feminist re-reading.

Nora Helmer in Ibsen's play carries forward the central thematic impulse. The play is constructed around Nora's emotional framework. She is placed in a domestic, marital and familial world set against the backdrop of a bourgeois world and middle-class prosperity. Money, marriage, love, childbearing, nurturing, home keeping and the social positioning of Nora Helmer – all these are interwoven in the total thematic fabric of the play. Ibsen steps ahead of his predecessors and contemporaries in the treatment of the inner and secret life of the characters within the broader framework of contemporary social reality. Instead of catering to the general taste of the audience or affirming faith in the social status quo, Ibsen takes up a ruthless analysis of contemporary social problems. The mind and some of human beings are exposed on the stage with frank honesty and commitment. Ibsen challenges the very notion of realism on which the contemporary stagecraft was highly biased. This notion was essentially patriarchal, derived from a society that relegated woman to the margins of economic empowerment, power and authority within family, even within individuals. Nora's emergence as a European woman of iron will and determination is a part of a new emerging feminist consciousness in the works of British women writers. Yet on the stage, her emergence was revolutionary: her presence shattered the myth of the eternally sacrificing women and suffering womanhood. Eva le Gallienne in the 'Introduction' to *Six Plays by Henrik Ibsen* states:

“The woman of the sagas with their wild deep nature had always held a great fascination for him [Ibsen]; and something of their sharply individual, fearless spirit undoubtedly crept into many of the women in Ibsen's plays; they are a combination of ice and flame.”

In the conception of Nora, we find the influence of several prominent women of Ibsen's generation. Through Nora, Ibsen achieves the finest portrayal of intricacies of female psychology. Ibsen declared that *A Doll's house* is a play about the emancipation of women. This emancipator consciousness has to be analyzed with references to the gender politics of the age. Ibsen vindicates the power, capability, role and position of women placed in an otherwise orthodox and patriarchal society. Unlike Shakespearean romantic comedies, Nora is not allowed

to share the same platform with her male counterparts; rather she has to work hard in order to gain access to the restricted territory of property rights, economic power and familial authority.

Early feminist criticism accepted Ibsen as the fountainhead of feminist theatre who preached from the pulpit, heralding equality in right and opportunity for women in an oppressive society. In Greek tragedies like Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Medea* and *Electra*, fearless women characters occupy the centre stage. Even in Shakespeare, the female characters like Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra are iron-willed, as are the romantic heroines like Viola, Rosalind and Portia. The quality of fearless individualism in these plays got controlled by the emerging patriarchal consciousness of the western world. Ibsen revives this tradition of fearless female individuals, that to in a society were gender discrimination and phallogocentric norms regulated the conditioning and role of women. By presenting Nora as a determined anarchist or iconoclast, Ibsen challenged male hypocrisy, indifference and discriminatory attitude to female. Nora emerges as a human being capable of courage and cowardice, tenderness and cruelty, honesty and deceit, sacrifice and merciless rapacity. Tormented by the extremities of traditionalism and individualism, Nora is presented as a woman in dire need of liberation. The spiritual and emotional conflict, a sense of responsibility towards the family, and an urge for freedom, accommodation and revolt – all these conflicting states torn her apart. Joan Templeton in his essay notes:

“Ibsen has been resoundingly saved from feminism, or as it was called in his day ‘the woman question.... Ibsen’s champions like to take this disavowal [disclaiming to have worked for the women’s rights movement] as his precise reference to his purpose in writing *A Doll’s house*.... Whatever propaganda the feminists may have made of *A Doll’s house*, Ibsen, it is argued, never meant to write a play about the highly topical subject of women’s right...”¹

Feminist re-reading takes this bio-literary aspect too seriously. In the Twentieth century, Nora was accepted as the potential feminist, partly confused and ambiguous. Critic like R.M. Adams prefers to regard Nora as “a woman imbued with the idea of becoming a person”, although the play proposes nothing categorical about women emancipation. Post sixties feminist criticism accepted Nora as something more than a woman arguing for female liberation. Feminist like Einar Haugen found in her something more than the petit feminist liberation as Nora embodies the comedy as well as the tragedy of modern life. In the MLA’s *Approaches to Teaching A Doll’s house*, the major theme of the play has been identified as having “connection with feminism”

Ibsen begins his portrayal by placing Nora in a patriarchy codified doll’s house. The first impression is that of a Nora complacent in this fabulous bourgeois doll’s house. As Nora comes into the room, she is “humming happily”. She even plays the role of a commodified entertainer much dedicated to the gratification of her husband. By playing an appropriate female role as the angel of the household world, she gradually leaves the spectators into the relative happiness in this patriarchal dungeon. A sense of entrapment creeps in as Nora finds herself in a cluttered and crowded familial world. The intimate life, secret disclosures of personal and economic problems, communication gap and the sense of alienation creeps into Nora’s mind. Gradually, the beautiful doll’s house evolves into an artificial entrapment, almost causing claustrophobia and alienation. Without expounding the metaphysical anguish of a woman trapped in the routine ritual of

¹ Templeton, Joan. “*The Doll’s house Backlash*” :28

domesticity, Ibsen allows Nora to step into the male world of enterprise and decision making. Richard Gilman finds the play “pitched beyond sexual difference” and Robert Brustein finds Ibsen “completely indifferent to the woman question”.² They agree that the central concern of the play is the individual freedom. Shaw claimed Nora to be an iconoclast and revisited the woman question in his play *Candida*. While Ibsen allows Nora’s final exit from her doll’s house, for Shaw it is a male who is in need of liberation, and *Candida*, the doll, emerges as the prime mover of the play. Although the controversy died away in the mid-twentieth century, Nora emerged as an international symbol of women’s issue. She can be regarded as every woman undergoing the process of trials and tribulations and emerging as a liberated person at the end. Among the male critics, there is a tendency to dislocate the feminist issues from the human issues of the play and regard the play as the morality of modern times. While the feminist critics found in Nora a denouncement of the patriarchal world and the play as a seminal work on the analysis of women problem, the male critics focus mainly on theatrical realism and human relationship.

Set against the backdrop of eighteenth century Europe, Nora belongs to the group of women, denounced as irrational, frivolous, frail, selfish, hysteric, narcissistic, and even mad. She has the symptoms to become the mad woman in the attic. She is an abnormal woman, unloving egoist who abandons her family for personal liberation, and steps out of the family bond imposed by the moral order of the day. In *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, we find the presence of women having the symptoms of Nora. The play written by male writer, here, became a recipient of furious literary attacks. Nora was blamed as immoral as the playwright. Ibsen was even clubbed as a satanic writer who had in mind a Medea like housewife. The crusaders of dismantled male ego found Nora as fatal female whose cruelty to husband and children has invaded the domestic world of domestic drama. Norwegian scholar like Else Host defends Ibsen’s presentation of a “carefree, charming lark”³ who had the potentiality to usurp male power but who was denied the opportunity to emerge as a full-fledged feminist. While Ibsen visualized the play as a domestic comedy, culminating in the erratic behaviour of Nora, the play had a spiraling effect on the contemporary drama. As Nora slams the front door, a new feminist theatre emerged, dismantling the superstructure of European drama, built on the feminine models of submissive wives.

With the Freudian onslaught of Nora’s abnormal psyche in the early Twentieth century criticism, the split within Nora gets exposed. She was no longer seen as a native victim of the patriarchal conservatism. She emerged as unprincipled and conscious female who could take risks to abandon the family and expose her to the outer world. Maurice Valency included Nora in a case study of female hysteria and found her a willful and unwomanly woman:

“Nora is a carefully studied example of what we have come to know as the hysterical personality — bright, unstable, impulsive, romantic, quite immune from feeling of guilt, and at bottom, not especially feminine”.⁴

Nora’s forgery to obtain the money to save her husband’s life becomes evidence pointing to her irresponsibility and egotism. She is condemned by Brian Johnston and her love is labeled as “unintelligent”. She is called a criminal for a trivial act that turns to evil as it fails to take universal ethical claims. Based on these circumstantial evidences, Nora has become blameworthy. Nora’s detractors have even sympathized with her suffering husband. She is

² Brustein, Robert. *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to Modern Drama*

³ Host, Else. ‘Nora’, in *Henrik Ibsen :180*

⁴ Valency, Maurice. “*The flower and the castle: an introduction to modern drama*”, :52

found incapable of appreciating her husband because of her compulsive and imaginative nature. Kate Millette's *Sexual Politics* in the Sixties, identifies deliberate male strategies to demean women in the works of the writers like D.H. Lawrence. She does not include Ibsen in her subject and ignores Ibsen's sexual politics in the conception of Nora. Like the Monster in *Frankenstein*, Nora gets released in the outer world, beyond the control of the male, even male writers and critics.

The otherwise 'childish', 'neurotic', 'unprincipled', 'immoral', 'fatal', 'indifferent', 'unwomanly', 'destructive' and 'bohemian' Nora emerged as a proponent of feminism within the polemics of Women's Rights Movement. The feminine mystique in the female preference for the comfortable refuge of the middle class prosperous male dominated world proved Nora as non-emblematic to the syndrome of Second Wave feminism in America. While Wollstonecraft found women brought up by society to become a playmate and imbibing the domestic virtues, even in Twentieth Century Nora was not accepted as a woman vindicating the rights of woman. However, in the works of eminent feminist thinkers, Nora's presence as a dynamic counterpart to the male world order became prominent with all her flaws. Nora was accepted as bourgeois Antigone and her role has been rescued from being demonized. Nora's essential humanity crosses the gender orientation. Even her abnormality is seen as a product of male deficiencies. Her opinion about her husband, her marriage, her domestic life and implied oppression emerged as testamental to the feminist movement. She is a triumphant woman who could disclaim the sense of male propriety and attack the very premise on which the male institution is built—the family.

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