

Sensitisation of Women by Henrik Ibsen in *A Doll's House*

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An Abstract

The present study is zeroed in on the famous play *A Doll's House* written by a versatile Norwegian nineteenth century writer Henrik Ibsen. He realizes the social problems emerging out of the marginalization of women during his life time. The theme revolves around the protagonist Nora Helmer, the wife of Torvald Helmer. The paper focuses on how Ibsen establishes himself to be an accidental feministic writer by incepting the common relationship conflicts between men and women by tarnishing the norms of the patriarchal mindset. The researcher has probed the psychological trauma, dilemma, rights, and the sufferings of Nora are relevant today to be studied during the pandemic crisis. The paper, further highlights how the 'Nora controversy' becomes 'Nora pact'. Ibsen had to risk his literary career before the play was received well but the play oozed out controversies as the theme was in favour of women. Though, the play was staged many a time as the context and content were against the nineteenth century societal codes established by men. Ibsen has been compared to William Shakespeare for his crafted creativity in adopting modernity to configure the artistic and the exponential reality in his plays. Realistic approach has been adopted in the said study. The play is corroded with the mutual fantasies and misunderstandings of the modern life.

Key words: Nora, marginalization, women, modernity, realistic, mutual fantasies, misunderstandings, pandemic crisis

The discussion is centered on the three act play *A Doll's House* (1879) by Henrik Ibsen. He has scored name and fame among the readers, the audience, the critics, the reviewers, and the scholars throughout the literary world with a special focus on Nora Helmer. This is an apt play to be studied during the pandemic crisis prevailed in the world. Almost every member of the family is at home and here the question arises about individual's domestic role and how one has to play it distinctly. Who has to perform the duties reserved to women and which are the duties of men at home? Ultimately that makes no difference in the life of women. Their life at house is constant and would be the same forever unless the masculine mind set changes.

The outraged controversy of the play being feministic, Henrik Ibsen, as a realist writer, had to convince the world that the play is "unintentionally feministic." The play was published in 1879 when the world was revolutionizing industries and the advanced scientific inventions. Nora, the protagonist of the play had to find her place and establish her identity before and after her marriage. John Gray, an American psychologist has authored a book entitled *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992). The book encompasses that most common relationship conflicts between men and women are the result of fundamental psychological differences between the sexes. This reference is limited to the relationship conflicts between men and women and the title itself. Similarly, Nora Helmer and Torvald Helmer had certain conflicts

throughout the play. Knowing the fact, I doubt, where from Torvald Helmer and Nora Helmer? Certainly, the answer could be sought at the end of the play. Among the critics, the Swedish playwright August Strindberg criticised the play in his volume of essays and short stories *Getting Married* (1884). Strindberg questioned Nora's walking out and leaving her children behind with a man that she herself disapproved of so much that she would not remain with him. Strindberg also considers that Nora's involvement with an illegal financial fraud that involved Nora forging a signature. All is done behind her husband's back, and then Nora's lying to her husband regarding Krogstad's blackmail. Those are serious crimes that should raise questions at the end of the play, when Nora is moralistically judging her husband. And Strindberg points out that Nora's complaint that she and Torvald "have never exchanged one serious word about serious things," is contradicted by the discussions that occur in act one and two.

Here, one could understand that, Nora's character is a gleaming creation by Ibsen. Justifiably, Nora's role is established not by her 'character' but by her 'departure' at the end of the play. She takes a bold decision to leave her three kids and her husband never minding her life prospects thereafter. There lies an abrupt end of the play with the doors being closed in the down stairs. The centre of controversy was nothing but, Nora's abrupt departure from her family. The play took a long time to convince the patriarchal mind set in the western developed countries. The main objective behind the study is to comprehend the self realization beyond psychological conflicts; *A Doll's House* unravels harsh life realities of women in the patriarchal society.

The nineteenth century play, *A Doll's House*, has similarities in its nature and compassion with some of the recent texts like, Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* as Jaya had to represent herself a typical Indian homemaker; Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence the Court Is in Session* primarily elucidates the life realities of middle-class working men and women, although living comfortably with status, and fighting for superiority. Nora's presentation of feminism is flaunted with that of *Droupdi* created by Mahasweta Devi. For instance, Nora is strictly domesticated in all respects. She has no job of her own and rather she succumbed in the household duties. She has no income of her own unless her husband gives her on her demand. She is busy preparing for the Christmas Eve as the play opens. She is needed a new dress for the costume dance but in vain she has to mend the available dress with the help of Kristine Linde. Also, her husband suggests her to keep herself occupied with the usual craft work instead of spending money extravagantly assuming his promotion benefits. The play was not received well on its publication for its climax, yet, it claimed one of the best ever written plays of all times for the theme and context which revolved around women in the realistic society.

Ibsen's Nora is eminent in nature, intelligent, lucid, and firm in thoughts compared to her husband Torvald Helmer. Nora is sexually excited, self-conceited in appearance, and agitated in the bourgeois society of her everyday life. He wants to show us how women fall victim of sacrifice in spreading predominance of power and freedom from the lower stage to the higher level of the masculine society. Before we comprehend the realities of Nora's life, let us understand the life of the creator of Nora.

Henrik Johan Ibsen (1828 –1906) is a Norwegian playwright and theatre director. He is one of the founders of theatre modernism as he is often known as "the father of realism" and one of the most influential playwrights of his time. His literary career spans almost five decades. He was born into an affluent merchant family in the wealthy port town of Skien in Bratsberg. At the age of seven, his father's financial ruin had a strong influence on Ibsen's works. Ibsen shaped his plays according to his family background and often modeled characters after family members. He published his first tragic play *Catilina* (1850) at the age of twenty two.

Ever since, he never missed the literary tune till his death. His best works include, to list a few, *Brand* (1866), *Peer Gynt* (1867), *Emperor and Galilean* (1876), *A Doll's House* (1879), *An Enemy of the People* (1882), *Ghosts* (1881), *The Wild Duck* (1884), *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), *Rosmersholm* (1886), *Hedda Gabler* (1892), and *The Master Builder* (1892). *A Doll's House* was known to be the world's most performed play in 2006 and he stands on par with Shakespearian performances. Ibsen wrote originally in Danish and many of his plays are set in Norway. Undoubtedly, Ibsen's plays had a strong influence upon contemporary culture.

Most of his plays were to be outrageous to his era. European theatre was expected to exhibit morals of family life and propriety. Ibsen's works configured the realities that lay behind the facades, revealing much to his contemporaries. He had a critical eye and conducted a free inquiry into the conditions of life and issues of morality. He has influenced the greatest playwrights and novelists such as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Miller, James Joyce, Eugene O'Neill and so on. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize couple of times for his literary merits.

His works cover the theme of financial difficulty as well as moral conflicts stemming from dark secrets hidden from society. Ibsen would name characters citing from his own family. He portrayed the suffered women, echoing his mother Marichen Altenburg. Ibsen's sympathy with women would eventually find significant expression with their portrayal in dramas such as *A Doll's House*. Ibsen became the creative director of Christiania Theatre in 1858. He was married to Suzannah Thoresen in 1858. The couple lived in penury and became very embittered with life in Norway. In 1864, he left Christiania and went to Sorrento in Italy in self-imposed exile. He returned to his native land after twenty seven years, and by the time he was considered to be a controversial writer but much after the publication of *A Doll' House*. Few years later he was noted as one of the successful writer of the time. Then he became more confident and began to introduce enough of his own beliefs and thoughts into the drama and termed the notion as the "drama of ideas". His next series of plays were considered to be the plays of Golden Age. He scaled the zenith of popularity to retain the center of dramatic controversy across Europe.

During his time, literature was emerging as a formidable force. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* caused uproar everywhere. Ibsen's plays initially reached a far wider audience as read plays rather than in performance. When *A Doll's House* was published, it had an explosive effect: it was the centre of every conversation at every social gathering in Christiania. His last days were brutal and he died after couple of strokes in 1900. He was buried in central Oslo. I feel proud to know that The Royal Norwegian Embassy in collaboration with Dramatic Art and Design Academy hosts the annual "Delhi Ibsen Festival" in Delhi since 2008 every year.

The life of Ibsen has left us to know to what extent he had understood the brutality against female by the male dominated society. In the world, almost all the professions are dominated by men, except the motherhood. Women are subjugated to kitchen, household duties and nursing kids at home. That is how the life of Nora Helmer was designed. Kristine Linde had to put extensive efforts to search a job and she was not exempted as she had to look after her bed ridden mother and brothers. Over the period, male dominance is predominant in the key professionals like, rulers, politicians, law makers, administrators, writers, business tycoons, actors, labourers, artists and so on. Per say, no female artists were found during the Shakespearian stage productions. Where were those women and why no equal opportunities to them on par with men?

The departure decision of Nora bewilders Torvald when his "little squirrel" decides to be a "free squirrel" and that is his high time to realize his self and the reality of life. The relevance of the play lies in its theme even after 141 years for unprecedented reasons. Nora is married to Torvald Helmer, he is supposed to be promoted as a bank manager and they had three affectionate kids Evar, Bobby and Emmy. Nora has everything except liberty, freedom and her own earnings. She knits clothes and adds every penny paid by her husband to settle the debt she owed for Torvald's treatment.

Nora's character has similarities with Sita of *Ramayana*. Sita toiled all the life sufferings after marriage in all walks of her life with Rama. She was with Rama in the forest for almost eleven years. Rama listened to a washer man and sent her to forest for fourteen years. Sita had borne her two kids and swallowed her untold sufferings. Politely, Sita had to reject worldly comforts offered to her along with her kids and had to show her chastity by entering fire. Sita had left with no choice but immersed herself into the mother earth. Similarly, in the modern context, Nora had to yoke along with Torvald more sincerely for eight years of marriage. She has looked after him during his severe illness. She arranged money for the treatment of his illness in Italy. She has cared for her kids and has looked after her husband carefully. She is just a dutiful doll to look after all the domestic chores. The title of the play is accurately entitled as *A Doll's House*, as Nora could not have been identified herself beyond a mere doll. The two dissimilar objects like "doll" and "house" could never be compared to beautiful and affectionate "Nora" and love filled "home" respectively. She was just a "little squirrel" for her husband in his emotional and physical needs. Profusely Nora admits:

He called me his doll-child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls. And when I came to live with you ... You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made noting of my life... I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa's doll-child; and here the children have been my dolls. I thought it great fun when you played with me, just as they thought it great fun when I played with them. That is what our marriage has been, Torvald. (74)

Nora has to tackle the love of Dr. Rank, a rich family friend who suffered by the venereal disease contracted by his father. She politely rejected his proposal sans a hurt. Nora is generous enough to protect the promise to her childhood friend Mrs. Kristine Linde in getting her job in her husband's bank. But her futile efforts go in vain. She has to undergo turmoil as Nils Krogstad used to blackmail her by bringing forth the forgery of her dead father's signature while raising money for her husband's treatment. Also he is worried about his job as Nora inclined to claim a job to her friend in her husband's bank. All efforts of her bear no fruits as Krogstad dropped the bond forged by Nora in the Torvald's letter box which was in his possession. At this crucial juncture, Nora seeks the help of Kristine Linde to persuade Krogstad, her ex lover. But the situation went beyond her control when Torvald comes across the forged bond only to yell at her irresistibly. Nora is distressed and as if nothing is left for her and nobody to rescue her. She confesses:

"I only know that you and I look at it in quite a different light. I am learning, too, that the law is quite another thing from what I supposed; but I find it impossible to convince myself that the law is right. According to it a woman has no right to spare her old dying father, or to save her husband's life. I can't believe that" (76).

But she was fortunate enough when the same forfeited bond is withdrawn by Krogstad. Torvald admits that he has forgiven his wife, which makes him love her all the more since it reminds him that she is totally dependent on him, like a child. He preserves his peace of mind by thinking of the incident as a mere mistake that she made owing to her foolishness, one of her most endearing feminine traits. But, Nora had a different statement and said, "We must come to a final settlement, Torvald. During eight whole years . . . we have never exchanged one serious word about serious things." (78).

Nora tells Torvald that she is leaving him, and in a confrontational scene expresses her sense of betrayal and disillusionment. She says he has never loved her; they have become strangers to each other. She says, "Torvald – it was then it dawned upon me that for eight years I had been living here with a strange man, and had borne him three children – Oh, I can't bear to think of it! I could tear myself into little bits" (78). She feels betrayed by his response to the scandal invigorating Krogstad, and she says she must get away to understand herself.

Nora says that she has been treated like a doll to play with for her whole life, first by her father and then by him. She rightly said, "I have been greatly wronged, Torvald – first by papa and then by you" (73). Torvald insists that she fulfill her duty as a wife and mother, but Nora says that she has duties to herself that are just as important, and that she cannot be a good mother or wife without learning to be more than a

plaything. She reveals that she had expected that he would want to sacrifice his reputation for hers and that she had planned to kill herself to prevent him from doing so. Nora admits:

Listen Torvald. I have heard that when a wife deserts her husband's house, as I am doing now, he is legally freed from all your obligations towards her. In any case, I set you free from all your obligations. You are not to feel yourself bound in the slightest way, any more than I shall.

There must be perfect freedom on both sides. See here is your ring back, Give me mine. (79)

She now realizes that Torvald is not at all the kind of person she has believed him to be and that their marriage has been based on mutual fantasies and misunderstandings.

Nora leaves her keys and wedding ring; Torvald breaks down and begins to cry, baffled by what has happened. After Nora leaves the room, Torvald, for one second, still has a sense of hope, and exclaims to himself "The most wonderful thing of all--?" just before the door downstairs is heard closing. Substantially, we could witness that Ibsen's Nora influences the readers, the researchers, the scholars, the critics, the artists, the audience, the producers, the translators, the actors, and many in most parts of the world since the Ibsen's age. The study has a lot research scope and meaningful relevance in its content and context.

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