

Nora Helmer in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*: A Feminist concern in English Literature

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Abstract- Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is a very controversial work of literature as it provokes the concept of new women and feminism. Nora's leaving the household for the name of self-respect is widely debated and has been marked as the first mutinous effort of female individuals against male chauvinist mentalities. The article aims to explore Nora's mentality and the discussion of critics regarding female liberty. It also sets to find out whether Nora's decision is acceptable under the social conventionality or her boldness throws her into more devastating situations. Textual references are given with the statements of other critics. A short comparative discussion is also presented to elucidate the concept of feminism and Ibsen's attitude towards womanhood.

Keywords- Feminism; Individuality; Self-Respect; Orthodoxy; Patriarchy; Harassment; Womanhood

ANALYSIS



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In several periods of our lives, we often ask: What is a woman? A human creature? A daughter, a wife, a mother? Well-defined by menfolk or standing on her own what does she want? Sometimes we think we will never find the answer to this question. The answer is often given in literature in various formats but the fact is how authentic and impartial the definitions are. Such intellectual debates evoked the term feminism and literature became an essential tool to practice its diverse fields of interests. Literary scholars discuss and establish this term in their under their own dexterity and excellence. They sketch such characters that not only arouse the notion of feminism but also provide a scope for the readers to brainstorm on it. Such a distinguished author is Henrik Johan Ibsen (20 March 1828 – 23 May 1906) who is acknowledged as a major 19th-century Norwegian playwright, theatre director, and poet and also called as "the father of realism"

and one of the founders of Modernism in theatre. His *A Doll's House* is a revolutionary literary work that deconstructed the conventional thinking patterns of readers regarding the value and position of a woman in a man's world, especially in domestic realm. The play is significant for its critical attitude toward 19th century marriage norms. It aroused great controversy at the time, as it concludes with the protagonist, Nora Helmer, leaving her husband Torvald Helmer, and children because she wants to discover herself:

"Ever since it was published, Ibsen's A Doll's House has generally been seen as the most forceful plea in world literature for equality between the sexes. Men and women, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers- this is its credo- are all in the first place 'human beings'. Self-realisation is its emancipatory key word. (Tornqvist, 1995, p.157)"

Ibsen was motivated by the belief that a woman cannot be herself in modern society as it is an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint. Moreover, 'Ibsen required the theatre to present important people encountering substantial reality' (Theoharis, 1999, p.27) and therefore, written *A Doll's House* to highlight the issue of gender discrimination and feminist revolution which were taking place in that age. Thus, this piece of literature shows a woman's self-consciousness toward self-respect. Critic Egil Tornqvist says:

"From the very beginning the situation is highly ironical. Reflecting the views of a male society, everyone sees Nora as a child to be cared for like

a doll. Limited to a family environment, she has few possibilities to satisfy her need for self-respect. Even her children are taken care of by others. No wonder she relishes her secret knowledge that she has performed an independent act of extreme altruism, an act that is her pride not least because it creates a balance within the marriage. Seemingly totally dependent on her husband, Nora knows that at least once in his life Helmer has been totally dependent on her. (1995, p.28)"

Therefore, it can be said that Nora is being forced to live a life structured and organised by the male dominated society in order to be acknowledged as an ideal woman. The norms prescribed for her is male originated and are assigned to be followed in order to be marked as an ideal daughter, mother and wife. It is like a puppet show where the dramatist makes the doll dance according to its twists and turns but a woman is not a puppet, thus Nora, in Ibsen's play, is not a doll to be played. Seigfried Mandel says:

"Nora's inner life can be reconstructed through the temper and tone of this impending Christmas eve...Christmas is a children's festival, and Nora is a child. Her childishness creates her charm, her danger, and her destiny. As the sole daughter of a widower who in his carefree ways spoiled her instead of bringing her up slowly, Nora grew older only in age. The transformation from her carefree days as a girl to marriage meant no more to her than a change from a small doll's house to a larger one. (1985, p.42)"

Human conscience is regarded as the sense or consciousness of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one's own conduct, intentions, or character together with a feeling of obligation to do right or be good. Hypothetical questions arise that whether it is correct to do a little wrong, like hiding a truth or telling a lie, in order to secure a great right, like saving a life or securing a respectable position. Obviously, people will do the little wrong, knowing and suffering that it should not be done, only but for the greater right. Torvald must have done the little wrong and at the end, it shows that he is that sort of man who can allow himself to do a little wrong to safe a greater correction. Nora has the same conscience which Torvald Helmer has but he considers his conscience to be just and Nora's to be unjust as if he is the judge of Nora's fate. Tornqvist further says: 'The central theme of the play hinges on the two kinds of consciences Ibsen speaks of his preliminary notes: Nora's individualist ethics versus Helmer's socially determined ones'. (Ibid, p.28).

It seems that Nora is somehow socialized and cultivated to be a subaltern to the male counterparts and if she speaks, which she has done at the end of the play, she will be condemned to be immoral. Regarding the concept of Gayatri Chokroborty Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean illustrates what we generally mean by the term subaltern:

"The subaltern such as cannot be heard by the privileged of either the First or Third Worlds. If the subalterns were able to make herself heard-as has happened when particular subalterns have emerged...that the subaltern, the most oppressed and invisible constituencies, as such might cease to exist. (Chanter, 2006, p.100)"

Thus, it arrives that women are not allowed to exercise her own critical conscience where men are always free not only to practice it but also to judge others under personal terms of beliefs. When Nora decides to leave Torvald's house and children, her decision shocks not only Torvald but also readers and Ibsen has shown the incident where everyone, Torvald and the readers are cinked to blame for her recalcitrant step. Critic Joan 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 wifehood 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' (2001, p.143)"

Ibsen has marked the fact that if a woman does something beyond the traditional or conventional boundaries, she is viewed as an alien. Leaving her matrimonial bondage and household slamming the door is a highest concern of feminism. It evokes a lot of question supporting or not supporting the act. The conventionalists will argue in a negative sense but the modern critics, especially the feminists, view the act as a revolutionary step of a simple housewife toward a new brave world. Critics James MacFarlane says: 'In closing the door on her husband and children, Nora opened the way to the turn-of-the-century women's movement.' (1994, p. 91). Harp in on the same tune, M.J.Farden marks:

"Just as Nora appears in the final scene, free and unfettered by any bond, divine or human, without commitment or obligation to the man whom she has given her promise or to the children she has brought into this world...the emancipated woman has taken her place at the door, always ready to depart, with her suitcase in her hand. The suitcase- and not, as before, the ring of fidelity- will be the symbol of her role in marriage. (Ibid, p.91)"

A very bold, brave and risky step, indeed. Risky in the sense that she is going out of her household for the first time and first time experiences are always full of adventure and risks. This ego consciousness of Nora may be evoked for the discrimination she faced from the very childhood to her married life. If Torvald has given equal rights and opportunities to Nora to support the earning of the household, the sudden evocation of self-respect may not have energized Nora to leave him. Critic Julia Swindells marks that the issue of earning is responsible for sexual

aversion in conjugal life and 'It seems to me that the construction of gender difference and hierarchy is created at work as well as at home- and that the effect on women (less physical and technical capability, lack of confidence, lower pay) may well cast a shadow on the sex relation of domestic life' (1985, p.2). We are not sure but we may guess that such a case may have taken place in Nora as well and thus her leaving.

Torvald's thinking is traditional and to some extent very orthodoxy, that's why Nora's involvement with the forgery issue troubled him so. He must have believed that a woman should not take any step, even in crisis that is beyond morality. He must think that 'one of the chief beauties in a female character, is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted even at the gaze of admiration' (Jones, 1990, p.45). On the contrary, If Torvald's thinking is supposed to be the opposite to the quoted lines, then it is hard to defy Joan Kelly's view: 'woman's social position has not always, everywhere, or in most respects been subordinate to that of men' (1984, p.10). In case of Nora, it is only herself who takes the chances to change her position, not Torvald. It seems that she wanted a life free from all ties, 'a life free from domestic tyranny, in which a woman could conquer the empire of her mind' (Apetrei, 2010, p.92)

On the other hand, we don't know how much educationally qualified Nora is though Florence Nightingale's revolutionary nursing expanded a trend of earning for women during 18th century:

"Women encountered strong resistance to their entering traditionally male professions, as seen in the case of women becoming doctors. But they were widely accepted into nursing, subject to the supervision and authority of male doctors after Florence Nightingale, born into a wealthy family, made it respectable. (Perkin, 1996, p.165)"

Therefore, Nora can start her new life accepting the radical social chances offered at that era but proper training is needed. We are completely out of knowledge of Nora's efficiency in education but we know that she can sew well. As she knows the fault of forgery, so we can say that she is educated but is her education enough? She must be taken training to start any job because leaving Torvald also marks leaving financial support as well. In case of women's training Philippa Levine says:

"Want of training is the first and greatest drawback to the employment of women...How can we expect habits of consistent industry to succeed a girlhood of negligence or thorough attention to work to follow the frivolous use previously made of her time (1994, p.86)"

We know very well that she does understand the law suits very keenly and forgery accusations and does experience the harsh taste of harassment of male counterparts but this doesn't prevent her taking new challenges in life. She is experienced in her own terms but who can guarantee that she won't be harassed a thousand times stepping out of her

conventional boundaries. In the home, she is insulted by her husband. When she tried to take a step out of her husband's knowledge, she is blackmailed by another person. Therefore, it can be imagined that a lady like Nora may face a hundred times more insults in the outer world which is full of unknown men. Does it mean she cannot take care of her security? This question is obvious because she failed to secure herself from the verbal assaults of her husband. There is no doubt that Torvald loves her. If a man who loves her can insult her this much, the men in the outside world, who has no connection or feelings for Nora, can insult her in more grossed manner. Many critics call Nora an emotional fool and her stepping of leaving her house is a stupidity and an act of over-ruled emotions. Was Nora not aware of the wide unknown world of men outside her house? Did she take the step of leaving being conscious or without being conscious of the fact? These questions are left untold like a riddle for the readers. In this regard, J. McFarlane says: 'Nora, in spite of the firmness of her resolution, is left confused; she cannot be sure, she says, how she will turn out, and all she knows is that the attempt must be made. (1989, p.237). A probable answer could be like 'What is needed is a revolution of the human spirit' (Chamberlain, 1982, p.18) and Nora took the initiatives.

Moreover, all questions encapsulate into one pivotal query and that is can a woman survive without the support or company of a male? In this 21st century, we can answer this question easily in position notion. Women have legal rights of property distribution, medical facilities, education, employment facilities and matrimonial ordinances. Under such authoritative administrations of 21st century, any woman can live even a more secure and potent life without the company of a man. In fact, she can serve her father, husband and son on the basis of her education and employment finances. *A Doll's House* was published in 1879 and the act of leaving the house for self-respect in 18th century is an exceptional attempt. 18th century lacks the freedom of speech, education and employment and therefore, Nora's step was a bold and controversial one. In one sense, we can say that she started the spark of feminism and the intense urge of individualistic self-respect as a woman in 18th century. G.B.Bryan defines the character of Nora to be a very complicated one, even for an actress who will ever perform the character on the stage:

"She has proven to be one of the most difficult roles for actresses because of the requisite breadth of effect. On the other hand, the player must be convincing as the capering, fawning, childlike bride who inhabits her husband's doll's house. On the other hand, the actress must persuade the audience that such a person is capable of altering a check, dealing with an extortioner, keeping a secret, and finally leaving her marriage to seek self-knowledge. Perhaps because of this complexity, Nora has been a

favourite role in the Ibsenian canon. (1984, p.160)”



It is marked that Nora Helmer is a controversial figure arousing the concept of feminism as the new women of the brave new world. If we compare her with the African Mistress in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we will find her a recalcitrant personality to the ideas of the subalternity. If we compare her boldness with the character Ayesha in R.Haggard's *She: A History of Adventure*, we find Nora more enthusiastic whereas Ayesha's metamorphosis into a monkey suggests her end. If we compare her with Shakespearean heroines, we will find her exceptional. For example- In *The Merchant of Venice*, the female protagonist Portia progresses the plot disguising into a male solicitor that is marked as a sort of subjugation for female counterparts. Similarly, in *As You Like It*, Rosalind disguises into Orlando to flourish her thoughts. But Nora didn't disguise herself as a wife or mother when her self-ego soared out. She is straightforward to Torvald regarding her own terms of life and does what she thinks is right under those circumstances. She is also condemned to break the norms of motherhood as a woman's womanist feature is best judge of her way of parenting and nurturing children. Nora has a fight with her husband but why she left the children who are innocent and completely not responsible for Nora and Torvald's domestic fracas. A mother is supposed to protect children but Nora left them for her urge of self-respect. The concept of rearing children was a matter of radical debate during Ibsen's age as the question whether a father or only a mother is responsible for child protection parenting was introduced by sociologists. Later this question was linked to feminism and became a more quintessential topic of discussion:

“Child protection work simultaneously represented mothers' demands, but also made mothers vulnerable; by calling into question the quality of their mothering, already made more problematic by urban wage-labour living conditions, by threatening them with the loss of their children, with the breaking of their most permanent bonds. (Mitchell and Oakley, 1994, p.76)”

Nora's sudden feminist ego can be evoked for the appearance of her old friend Mrs.Linde. She is a woman who is complete opposite of Nora. It may so happen that

Mrs.Linde's personality provided a push to the self-realisation esteem in Nora and unconscious comparison resulted into an outburst for the urge of self-recognition at the end:

“Mrs Londe, casts a harsh and sober pall over Nora's festive joy; Mrs. Linde resembles the hard workday-cold, joyless and as grubby as her relentless work for bare necessities. The prohibition of every outer luxury, of everything that could be done without, constricted and oppressed Mrs.Linde's inner life; the potential richness of her nature was emasculated, and only utilitarian and sensible considerations found expression. (Mandel, 1985, p.47)”

Many Critics does not support Nora's brave attempt of leaving her domestic roles. Michael Meyer says:

“The wife in the play ends by having no idea what is right and what is wrong; natural feelings on the one hand and belief in authority on the other lead her to utter distraction....Moral conflict. Weighted down and confused by her trust in authority, she loses faith in her own morality, and her fitness to bring up her children. Bitterness. A mother in modern society, like certain insects, retires and dies once she has done her duty by propagating the race. Love of life, of home, of husband, and children and family. (1990, p.13)”

This is the conventional view of almost every people who do not support anything that goes beyond tradition. Believing that the flower looks good in the garden, they will charge Nora of not only being irresponsible as a mother but also unfaithful as a wife. We really don't know what actually happened to Nora after she left home. It may so happen that she survived a new life with better living or she ruined herself in the male-treatment of the greater outside world of men. Ibsen has left readers with an open question and has given ample opportunities to them to judge Nora's last attempt toward self-respect.



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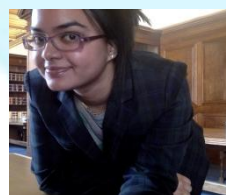
The dramatist has given readers the scope to imagine Nora's position in the outer world and to make a conclusion because, as a social critic, he views: 'in the late nineteenth century women were faced with a demoralising choice between a mercenary marriage or penury as a single woman trying to earn a living' (Ledger, 1997, p.21) It may

so happen that Nora leaves a single working woman life with satisfaction or she may get married and start a new domestic life. It can also be happen that she gets just the opposite of what we are imagining of her. Ibsen has never made another series defining Nora's journey which could have given a hint of her. Nor we know whether Torvald has married again and started a new life or he has changed into a more responsible person as he has to be the father and the mother of his children. The question also arise in case of Torvald that can a man run a family without the help of a wife or can a man live his life without the love and care of a liable wife? It also evokes the doubt whether a father can rear his children without the assistance of a mother? These all are social phenomena that plums out for Nora's decision of leaving a life all by her own. Does we all should to the way Nora did? Most probably not. Because it requires not only courage but also a heart that can control emotions stubbornly of which human beings often fall for. Nora's feminist impulses are stronger than her motherly affection and matrimony commitments and therefore, she is our feminist concern.

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