

A Study on Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* from a Feminist Point of View

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Abstract—The following study shows how Henrik Ibsen emphasizes in *A Doll's House* the hollowness of the European male-dominated societies. This paper first attempts to focus on the feminist literary theory, considers its role in literature. It then tries to explore to what extent Henrik Ibsen can be considered as a feminist. Finally, it attempts to throw light on *A Doll's House* from a feminist point of view. Thus it questions the existing traditional beliefs regarding the roles of men and woman in nineteenth century marriage as expressed in the play. Thus, this paper enables us to see how the play makes people reconsider the ideology of the male-dominated European societies, here more particularly, the Norwegian society at that time. Furthermore, this paper enables us also to realize why, to many Europeans then, the play became very scandalous, for they considered the covenant of marriage as very holy; but the way Ibsen portrayed it in his *A Doll's House* was very controversial.

Keywords—Anglo-American Feminism; Feminism; Male Chauvinism; Marriage; Patriarchy.

I. INTRODUCTION

HENRIK JOHAN IBSEN (20 March 1828 – 23 May 1906) was an influential Norwegian playwright; besides, he was a theatre director, and poet. As one of the most important figures of modernism in theatre, Ibsen is often considered as the father of realism. He is the most frequently performed dramatist in the world after Shakespeare; and, according to *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*, *A Doll's House*, play in three acts by him, achieved the prestige of becoming the world's most performed play by the early twentieth century [Henrik Ibsen, 1; Bonnie G. Smith, 2].

A Doll's House, in Norwegian as *Et dukkehjem*, is one of his major plays which is significant for how it deals with the harsh realities of the fate of a married woman, Nora. The play is based on Ibsen's "Notes for a Modern Tragedy" jotted down by him in Rome on the 19 October 1878. He was strongly inspired by the belief that "a woman cannot be herself in modern society," since it is "an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint" ("Notes for a Modern Tragedy"; quoted by Meyer [8]). That is why we find Nora in *A Doll's House* lacking some reasonable opportunities required for self-fulfillment in a male-chauvinistic world. The play aroused in people a strong sensation about husband-wife relationship in a world controlled by the male ideology. Furthermore, it focused on the male-dominated society in a way that a great storm of outraged controversy followed immediately, which went beyond the theater to the world newspapers and societies.

II. THE FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY AND ITS ROLE

The feminist literary criticism that we understand today is actually the direct result of the 'women's movement' of the 1960s, but 'feminist literary theory', as a term, gained widespread acceptance during the mid-1980s. Now it refers to literary criticism which is informed by feminist theory, or more broadly, by the politics of feminism. It applies the principles and ideology of feminism to analyze and critique the language of literature and the role of women in the patriarchal society. Feminist literary criticism seeks to analyze and describe how literature portrays the narrative of male chauvinism by exploring the economic, social, political, and psychological forces which remain subtly embedded within literature. Peter Barry rightly says: "in feminist criticism in the 1970s the major effort went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural 'mind-set' in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality."

In literary studies, feminist criticism challenges the patriarchal attitudes and ideology. Thus, it raises questions about the prejudices and assumptions made by the dominant male writers and their common tendency to put women in stock character roles. 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 [Cuddon, 5].

However, there is a major division within feminist criticism concerning some disagreements about the amount and type of theory that should feature in it. What is usually called the 'Anglo-American' version of feminism is actually an approach to literature that, according to Wallace, "analyzes literary texts, the conditions of their production, reception, circulation, and their cultural effects from the perspective of gender difference" [Wallace, 12]. As the name obviously suggests, this approach has actually been influenced by American and British feminism. About the 'Anglo-American' version of feminism, Peter Barry says:

The 'Anglo-Americans' (not all are English or American) maintain a major interest in traditional critical concepts like theme, motif, and characterization. They seem to accept the conventions of literary realism, and treat literature as a series of representations of women's lives and experience which can be measured and evaluated against reality. They see the close reading and explication of individual literary texts as the major business of feminist criticism [Peter Barry, 2].

British feminist criticism has developed quite a political orientation; Mitchell's *Women: The Longest Revolution* (1966) examined Marxist categories of production and private property along with psychoanalytic theories of gender [Habib, 7]. According to Wallace [12], British feminism has been marked by two distinctive features: first, it emerged through other radical political discourses (specifically Marxism) and second, it was preoccupied with the documentation and the analysis of the effects of culture and ideology on women. This type of feminism considered art, literature and life as inseparable; the way women were portrayed in literature has some influence on how women are treated now in real life. British feminists believe that the patriarchal society does not exploit women only through literature but also socially and economically; thus the family structure makes women to be economically dependent on men. This type of feminist criticism does not only aim to critique the patriarchal society but also it tries to change it [Bressler, 4]. Wallace says that Anglo-American feminism has gone through four phases:

From the early images-of-women criticism through a preoccupation with women's writing and its tradition to a phase of theorization induced by Continental poststructuralist and psychoanalytic thought and fundamental to the presently dominant gender critique [Wallace, 12].

III. HENRIK IBSEN AS A FEMINIST

It is quite hard to say whether Henrik Ibsen was a feminist or not may. Finney states that "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" [Finney, 6]. Those who support the former stance

may refer to an amateur performance of *A Doll's House* performed by Karl Marx's daughter, Eleanor; her husband, Edward Aveling; William Morris's daughter May and Bernard Shaw [11] himself; all of whom were not only involved in the women's cause but also they were or would be notable figures in the British socialist movement. It should also be noted here that during the 19th century, feminism and socialism were closely connected. Finney argues that "the most prominent socialist thinkers of the day, male and female, saw that true sexual equality necessitates fundamental changes in the structure of society" (ibid.). When we are talking about Ibsen himself, he never overtly admitted being a feminist as proved by his speech held at the festival of the Norwegian Women's Right League in Christiania, May 26th, 1898:

I am not a member of the Women's Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda. I have been more poet and less social philosopher than people generally seem to believe. I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of humanity in general. And if you read my books carefully, you will understand this. True enough, it is desirable to solve the problem of women's rights, along with the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity [Henrik Ibsen, 9].

Ibsen's concerns, perhaps, were neither political nor feminist; or perhaps he was rather human in his approach. We may say he might have held the idea that one does not necessarily need to be a feminist in order to defend women; what one actually needs is to be human.

But it will not be appropriate anyway to say that Henrik Ibsen was not involved in the women's cause, for it would be a big mistake as there are many of his speeches and letters which prove that he was concerned about the so-called *weaker sex* [Women are generally considered as the "weaker sex" due to the biological differences between men and women]. In his speech to the working men of Trondhjem on June 14th, 1885, Ibsen mentions:

The reshaping of social conditions which is now under way out there in Europe is concerned chiefly with the future position of the workingman and of woman. That it is which I hope for and wait for; and it is that that I will work for [Henrik Ibsen, 9].

Moreover, it should also be noted that Ibsen was considered one of the four central male voices for feminism in Norway along with Bjornstjerne Bjornson, Jonas Lie and Alexander Kielland. They unanimously petitioned the Norwegian National Assembly and demanded that women should have the right to control their estates and this right should be made automatic [Lorentzen, 10]. Ibsen, in his attempt to explain why women instead of men should be

consulted about the married women's property bill, commented: "to consult men in such a matter is like asking wolves if they desire better protection for the sheep" [Finney, 6]. All of those four critics showed a common concern for the connection between love and economics as their petition stated:

She must know and feel that she enters the marriage with the same rights as her husband. Not only she, but her husband too, will benefit morally from this, and their lives together will, from the outset, assume the proper sense of dignity. Also love, if it exists, will be supported by the feeling of equality [Lorentzen, 10].

Henrik Ibsen invariably supported this petition just a week earlier in his letter addressed to Bjornston. The letter concludes with the following statement:

If I could have my way back at home, then all the unprivileged should unite and form a strong, resolute, progressive party, whose program would be directed towards nothing but practical and productive reforms, towards a very wide extension of suffrage, the statutory improvement of the position of woman, the emancipation of national education from all kinds of medievalism, etc. (ibid.).

Thus, from all these quotes by Henrik Ibsen, it now becomes easier for us to conclude that he has an involvement and concern of the women's cause. But the reason why Ibsen never labeled himself as a feminist or supporter of feminism may be because of "Ibsen's frequently voiced disinclination to belong to parties or societies of any kind" [Finney, 6].

IV. GENDER ISSUES IN A DOLL'S HOUSE: A FEMINIST VIEW

When one throws light on *A Doll's House* from a feminist point of view, the title itself becomes very significant. While playing with dolls, what children does is actually they make the dolls perform various social roles over which the lifeless dolls do not have any control. Here in the play, the same thing is suggested by its title. We find the same thing—Nora, a doll, does not have any say in the society she lives in. The analogy is most clearly stated when Nora says: "Here I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I used to be papa's doll-child. And the children, in their turn, have been my dolls" (*A Doll's House*, Act 3: 164).

In fact, the word 'doll' here refers to a woman having no mind or will power of her own. Nora the central character of the play, has almost always been treated like a doll. Before her marriage, her father treated her like a baby-doll—she was under the control and guidance of her father. And after her marriage with Torvald, she became a doll to him.

Torvald's insistence on calling Nora by affectionately diminutive names actually shows how helpless and dependent she is on him. We find that Torvald calls Nora by her actual name only when he is scolding her. But when greeting or

adoring her, he calls her by childish animal nicknames such as "my little skylark" and "my squirrel." By putting her within such a system of names, Torvald not only shows his power over Nora but dehumanizes her to a degree also.

The short transaction between Nora and the porter at the opening of *A Doll's House* immediately puts the spotlight on money. Although Nora owes the porter fifty øre (a Norwegian unit of currency), she gives the porter him twice that amount, presumably because she is infused with the holiday spirit. But her husband Torvald holds a more pragmatic view of money, jokingly calling Nora a 'spendthrift' and telling her that she is completely foolish when it comes to financial matters. Torvald's belief that Nora's lack of understanding of the matters related with money is the result of her gender: "Nora, Nora! what a woman you are!" (*A Doll's house*, Act 1: 25). This undoubtedly reveals his prejudiced viewpoint on gender roles. Torvald believes that a wife's role is just to beautify the home, she should do so not only through proper management of domestic life but also through her proper behavior and appearance. This becomes clear when Torvald tells Nora "[n]o one would believe how much it costs a man to keep such a little bird as you" (Act 1: 28). Here it becomes mandatory to note the phrase—"to keep such a little bird..."—that Torvald uses for Nora.

Furthermore, we see that although Torvald accuses Nora of being a spendthrift, he gives her more money in order to see her happy reaction. This act of Torvald shows that he loves to amuse himself by manipulating his wife's feelings. Then, Nora is really Torvald's doll—she decorates his home and pleases him by unknowingly making herself a dependent figure whose emotions he can toy with. In addition to being something of a doll to Torvald, Nora seems to be a child to him also. Torvald seems to be competing with Nora's dead father for Nora's loyalty. In a sense, by manipulating Nora in a way that she becomes dependent upon and subservient to him, Torvald actually plays the role of Nora's second father. He treats her as a child, doling out money to her and attempting to guide and instruct her in the ways of the world.

Moreover, we must focus on Nora's gift selections for the celebration of coming Christmas—a sword and a horse for her male children and a doll for her daughter. This shows how Nora unconsciously carries the ideology of the male-chauvinistic world. By her selections of gifts, she reinforces the stereotypical gender roles that hold her in subservience to Torvald. Nora sees her daughter the same way she has been treated all of her life—as a doll.

It is true that, at the beginning of the play, Torvald's household seems to be happy, but we gradually find out that there are many deceptions going on inside as the play progresses. Nora's lying to Torvald about her eating macaroons is just a simple instance of deception, but a far more serious case of deception concerns the loan illicitly acquired by Nora in order to save Torvald's life. This instance of deception is under our focus, because of Torvald's unfair stereotypes about gender roles. In both instances of deception, Nora lies because she knows that it will be hard

for Torvald to accept his wife's help. If Torvald didn't feel the need to have control over her every movement, Nora would not have to lie to him. Thus, although Nora is economically privileged in comparison to the play's other female characters, we can clearly see that she leads a difficult life because the ideology of their society dictates that Torvald be the marriage's dominant partner. It is essentially Torvald who holds the power to issue decrees and condescends to Nora, and Nora has no other alternative but to hide her loan from him because she knows well that Torvald could never accept the idea that his wife (or any other woman) had helped save his life. This becomes clear when Nora tells Mrs Linden the following:

Good heavens! What can you be thinking of 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-respect, 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 (A Doll's House, Act 1: 46).

Furthermore, Nora must work in secret to pay off her loan, as it is illegal for a woman to obtain a loan without her husband's permission. Thus by motivating Nora's deception, the attitudes of Torvald and his society leave Nora vulnerable to Krogstad's blackmail.

When Nora requests Torvald to find Mrs. Linden a job, Torvald again shows his biases concerning women's proper roles in society by readily assuming that Mrs. Linden is a widow. Torvald's such assumption shows that he strongly believes that a proper married woman should not work outside the home. Also, as Torvald departs with Mrs. Linden, he says to her, "Come, Mrs Linden; only mothers can stand such a temperature" (Act 1: 60). Here Torvald actually suggests that any woman who wants a job must not have children. We must be aware of the fact that these words contain a veiled expression of pride, as Torvald is pleased that his home is fit only for the things that he considers to be the proper kind of woman: a mother and wife, like Nora.

Towards the end of Act one, Nora's conversation with Krogstad reveals that Krogstad is the source of the loan Nora used to pay for her family's trip to Italy to save her husband's life. Although Nora committed a crime in taking the loan, because she forged her father's signature to get it, she takes pride in it as it remains one of the few independent actions she has ever taken in her life by so far. Also, as she talks to Krogstad, Nora feels proud, because she is able to influence her husband: "[y]ou see one has a wee bit of influence, after all. It doesn't follow because one's only a woman..." (Act 1: 64). Thus Nora's pride about influencing Torvald and her independent action of taking the loan reveal her desire to feel useful and important. Nora points out that even if she is a woman, Krogstad should respect her, for she has some influence over bank policy. This actually suggests that she senses and fears rejection of her significance on account of her gender. This is the idea that she must combat even in her own mind. We, therefore, become aware of how weak Nora's

pride and happiness are in the patriarchal society that she lives in.

Whatever influence Nora holds over her husband, Torvald, is extremely limited; for paradoxically, when in the second act, Krogstad requests Nora to exert her influence on Torvald on his behalf, he says, "Mrs. Helmer, will you have the kindness to employ your influence on my behalf?" (Act 1: 64). Nora immediately perceives that his request will be nothing but an insult to her husband, so Nora reacts to Krogstad by saying "[b]ut, Mr. Krogstad, I have no influence—absolutely none." (Act 1: 65). Krogstad's statement implies that Torvald fails to conform to the societal belief—the husband should be responsible for all financial and business matters—by letting Nora sway him. But Torvald, for his part, considers Nora as completely useless when it comes to matters of business. Torvald just agrees to help Mrs Linden find a job in order to make his 'little squirrel' happy.

Furthermore, an intensive reading of *A Doll's House* shows how Ibsen paints a bleak picture of the sacrificial role of women in all economic classes of his society. In general, the female characters of the play invariably exemplify Nora's assertion (spoken to Torvald in Act Three) that even if men refuse to sacrifice their integrity, "[m]illions of women have done so" (*A Doll's House*, Act 3: 172). We must not fail to point out that Mrs. Linden found it necessary to abandon Krogstad, her true—but penniless—love, and marry a richer man in order to support her mother and two brothers. Once the nanny, too, had to abandon her own child just to support herself by working as Nora's caretaker. Furthermore, she had to work in Torvald's house too to take care of Nora's children also. As she tells Nora, the nanny considers herself lucky to have found the job, for she was "[a] poor girl who's been in trouble must take what comes" (*A Doll's House*, Act 2: 84).

Nora's abandonment of her children in the final act of the play can also be an example of self-sacrifice. In spite of Nora's great love for her children as manifested by the way she interacts with them, she feels forced to leave them, for the patriarchal society leaves no room for her happiness without any sacrifice. Finally we find that, to reject male chauvinism and to be herself, Nora sacrifices many important things and aspects of her life.

In second act of the play, Nora says to Mrs. Linden that Torvald doesn't like to see sewing in his home, which clearly indicates again that Torvald holds the idea of the appearance of a beautiful, carefree wife who does not need to work but rather serves as a showpiece. As Nora explains to Mrs. Linden that Torvald likes his home to seem "bright and beautiful" (Act 2: 87), Mrs Linden's response that Nora too is skilled at making a home look happy otherwise "[she] wouldn't be [her] father's daughter" (Act 2: 87). This suggests that Nora's father, too, regarded her in a way similar to Torvald—as a means to giving a home its proper appearance.

Furthermore, in the third act, Torvald's control over Nora takes on an even darker tone with his somewhat perverse sexual advances towards Nora:

NORA: [Struggling with him in the doorway.] No, no, no! I won't go in! I want to go upstairs again; I don't want to leave so early!

HELMER: But, my dearest girl—!

NORA. Oh, please, please, Torvald, I beseech you- only one hour more!

HELMER. Not one minute more, Nora dear; you know what we agreed. Come, come in; you're catching cold here.

[He leads her gently into the room in spite of her resistance.] (Act 3: 137)

He treats her as if she is nothing but his possession, like the young girl whom he first acquired years ago. Torvald's inability to understand that Nora is not mentally prepared when he attempts to seduce her actually stems from his firm belief that Nora, as his wife, is just his property without having anything to say. Thus Nora's coldness and rebuff of his sexual advances leave Torvald not baffled but incredulous as he considers her simply an element of the life that he idealizes. He has by far believed in the illusory relationship that Nora has helped him to create over the years that now he cannot comprehend the reality of the situation—that Nora can also be discontent with her life and, furthermore, sometimes willing to express it too.

Nora finally realizes the nature of her marriage with Torvald and about her real position in the patriarchal society she lives in when, in the third act, Torvald finally comes to know from Krogstad's letter about the crime of forgery Nora committed. Torvald's selfishness comes to its peak in his lack of concern about his wife's fate, despite the fact that she committed the crime to save his life.

Torvald panics upon learning of Nora's crime, but he does not panic because he cares about what might happen to her, rather he panics because he worries that his reputation will be damaged if knowledge of Nora's crime becomes public. Instead showing any gratitude for her noble intent, Torvald threatens and blames Nora and then immediately begins to think about the ways to cover up the shame that she has cast on his family.

All these things open Nora's eyes to the truth about her relationship with Torvald, for she now clearly understands that the hollowness of Torvald's affection towards Nora; that is why she says to Torvald: "You have never loved me. You only thought it amusing to be in love with me" (Act 3: 163). Nora now rearranges her priorities and her course of action. She shifts from thinking about suicide to deciding to walk out on Torvald. This shows that Nora now rejects the hollow male-domination and reflects her independence and sense of self.

With the coming of Krogstad's second letter and Torvald's reading that, the hollowness of Torvald's promises to save Nora indicates how little he appreciates her sacrifice. His proclamation of "I'm saved" after Krogstad's letter of retraction arrives actually shows that he has been thinking only about himself in his panic. He does not say anything about Nora until she asks, "And I?" His casual response to

her question—"You too, of course; we are both saved, both of us." (Act 3: 157)—reveals how much her well-being is an afterthought to him.

Nora finally realizes that since she has been treated as a child for all her life by far, she now needs to grow up before she can raise any children or take on any other responsibilities. Her defiance of Torvald when he forbids her from leaving shows her epiphany that she is no longer obligated to let Torvald dictate her actions—she declares her independence and her control over her own life. The height of Nora's awakening comes when she tells Torvald: "I have other duties equally sacred" (Act 3: 167); her duty to herself is just as sacred as her duties to her husband and children. Thus it finally becomes obvious to her she is a human being before she is a wife and a mother, and that she is obliged to herself to explore her personality, ambitions, and beliefs; for she says:

I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are- or at least that I should try to become one. I know that most people agree with you, Torvald, and that they say so in books. But henceforth I can't be satisfied with what most people say, and what is in books. I must think things out for myself, and try to get clear about them (Act 3: 167-8).

Thus Nora finally exits her doll's house slamming the door behind her, emphatically resolving the play with an act of bold self-assertion.

V. CONCLUSION

At first glance, *A Doll's House* does not seem very feministic, but as we go deeper, we find how much patriarchy is stitched in every aspect of the society Nora lives in. As the plot progresses towards its climax, the play raises questions about the male-dominated society based on contemporary misconceptions about women; and the protagonist Nora finally transforms from a doll, a possession, whose sole purpose is to entertain her husband, into an individual human being.

In his play, Ibsen does not put his female characters into the typical social roles which make them supernatural creatures; be it angels or demons. Perhaps he wants to show that it is not necessary to portray women as supernatural—as angels, or demons. Women, no matter how good or bad they may be, are neither one of them; they are necessarily human beings with virtues as well as faults.

Ibsen's use of two different couples in his play to show how the fate of a marriage based on the equality of both spouses differentiates from one based on the dominance of the husband and the suppression of the wife. Krogstad and Christine are finally united, who enjoy a happy ending after a fair share of hardships as two equals deciding to unite and form a family. On the other hand Nora—after Torvald and her marriage, in which Nora has always been underestimated, considered inferior by him, and finally blamed cruelly for the forgery that she committed to save him—shatters into pieces

after eight long years due to a lack of communication and understanding.

Thus utterly disillusioned about her husband, whom she now sees as a hollow fraud, Nora finally realizes that she has so long been just a doll with just the duties of a wife and mother, but her duties have left her with no opportunities to explore her inner self in the male-dominated world; so she leaves her doll's house with a door slam behind her. George Bernard Shaw [11] suggests that she leaves to begin "a journey in search of self-respect and apprenticeship to life," and that her revolt is "the end of a chapter of human history."

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