

Re-reading Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*: A Modern Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

This article aims to present a re-reading of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* from a feminist perspective. Ibsen's play is a pioneering feminist play, and he is credited for creating the first real feminist character in the history of theatre. The central female characters are analyzed, and the article also addresses the attitude of society towards women and how they struggle to prove themselves. Feminist literary criticism and feminism constitute the conceptual framework of the paper. In this play, Nora Helmer is under the illusion that her married life is perfect and that she owns what she deserves. Torvald, her husband calls her a 'twittering lark', 'squirrel', 'song-bird', and she is pleased with it. However, her illusion shatters when she faces the reality of finding herself being treated like a doll. As soon as she realizes that there exists an individual self of her, she revolts. She leaves the house, challenging the social institutions which contribute to women's subjugation. Nora protests against the ill-treatment towards her by society for her willingness to get her right back, for her self-respect, and for finding herself.

Keywords

Feminism, Women, Social Force, Patriarchy, Subjugation

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Introduction

Feminism as a movement advocates women's liberation and self-independence. In literature, feminist perspective is focused on unravel the instances of women's subjugation and oppression. Feminism school of thought seeks to analyze and describe how literature portrays the male domination by exploring the economic, social, political, and psychological forces embedded within literature (Tyson 83). Feminism has a purpose to balance the interrelation of gender. Feminism embodies women's movements to refuse anything shape of marginalization, subordination, and women oppression within inequality in political, social and economic omen (Agger 184). It is a condition when the women are considered in underclass which the women have passive characteristic and the men hold important duties because of their role. The men underestimate anything shape of oppression of women in the market, politics, and culture because men look at the women as not a citizen (Agger 201).

Radical Feminism is a branch of Feminism theory, beholding that oppression of women happened because patriarchy system happens to family and to the expectation of heterosexuality and culture, where the women become an object to oppression (Agger 220). It means that family is the main source of woman oppression. Feminism must be able to repair family a create culture non-misogynist where a woman does not become an object. This theory helps to understand and analyze the play from a feminist context and establish the hypothesis.

Much has been written about the play *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen and the amount of this literature is clear evidence of the unrelenting popularity of this play. Critics like Joan Templeton, M. Meyer, and Einar Haugen have paid less attention to the feminist reading of *A Doll's House* rather they have focused more on reading the text as a modern play. There are some feminist criticisms of the play, such as Kristin Ørjasæter, Unni Langås, David Wheeler and so on, which establish the play as strong feminist writing and show emancipation of women from domination omitting the real and

oppressive condition of women in the society. In the play, *A doll's House*, Nora, the protagonist revolts against the traditional norm of marriage and walks away from the house to find herself. It is considered one of the most revolutionary acts at that time. The focus of this article is on female characters in the above-mentioned play and brings out the actual condition of women in society as depicted in the play.

Keen observation of the presentation of women and their act brings out the real fact concerning women's condition in society. Though it seems, as literary works point out, in this modern age women protest against the hostile attitude towards them shown by society, still they could not revolt against their societal conditions. Women take steps and act against society but it is them who go out of the house, not men. They take action in protest of the oppression but this is also the social force; the patriarchal forces still dominate them.

The play *A Doll's house* by Henrik Ibsen is a primary source for the textual analysis in this paper. For presenting a Feminist reading, other canonical books and articles of feminism are also used as secondary sources. In this regard, some other feminist texts and theories are discussed. It first uses information already available for literature review. Secondly, it analyzes the information gathered and makes a hypothesis. Finally, these analyses formulate the thesis statement of the paper in relevance to the hypothesis and reach a conclusion.

Some Feminist Theories by Prominent Feminists

Before Moving to the main section, it is important to comprehend some literary feminist theories and literary works laid by some well-known feminists to have a better understanding. In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett argues that women and men, consciously and unconsciously, conform to the cultural ideas established for them by society. Cultural norms and expectations are transmitted through media, television, movies, songs, and literature. Boys must be aggressive, self-assertive and girls must be passive and meek. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is widely regarded as the first feminist writing. A single, financially independent mother at a time when this was entirely unheard of, she wrote a densely packed text calling for women to be educated so that they could be more than mere wives. The 1792 tome indicts men for encouraging excessive emotion in women. She criticizes stereotypes of women as emotional and instinctive and argues that women aspire to the same rationality prized by men. Wollstonecraft believed that women should enjoy social, legal and intellectual equality with men. Women must take the lead and articulate who they are and what role they will play in society. Women must reject the patriarchal assumption that women are inferior to men.

John Stuart Mill's essay on *The Subjection of Women* is a defense of gender equality in which he attacks the idea that women are naturally incapable of doing things

that men can do, should therefore be forbidden from doing them. The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir discussed many of the questions of feminism and feminists' sense of injustice in her groundbreaking book *The Second Sex*. The second wave of feminism is largely concerned with social and economic equality and with ending discrimination and inequality of laws. He declares that French and Western societies, in general, are patriarchal, controlled by males. Since the female is not the male, she becomes the Other.

Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One's Own* hypothesizes the existence of Shakespeare's sister, equally as gifted a writer as he. She states that gender prevents her from having a room of her own. She cannot obtain an education or find profitable employment because she is a woman. Her innate artistic talents will therefore never flourish, for she cannot afford a room of her own.

To Room Nineteen is one of the collected stories in Doris Lessing's *A Man and Two Women*. It centers on a middle-aged English woman, whose world in a mid-twentieth-century London suburb revolves around her husband, her four children, and her home. Everyone thinks Susan and her husband Matthew are the perfect couple, who have made all the right choices in life. When Susan packs her youngest children off to school, however, she begins to question the "intelligent" decisions she has made. When she discovers that her husband has been having extramarital affairs, she embarks on a journey of self-discovery that ultimately becomes a descent into madness.

The Good Woman of Setzuan by Bertolt Brecht deals with a female character as the protagonist. The play follows a young prostitute, Shen Te, as she struggles to lead a life that is "good" without allowing herself to be abused and trod upon by those who would accept and, more often than not, abuse her goodness. Her neighbors and friends prove so brutal in the filling of their bellies that Shen Te is forced to invent an alter ego to protect herself: a male cousin named Shui Ta, who becomes a cold and stern protector of Shen Te's interests. The theme of qualitative "goodness" is shown as almost impossible for both genders, especially for females. A woman cannot survive in society by remaining wholly chaste and not implementing any deception.

Feminist Perspective of *A Doll's House*

Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* has been praised by critics and academics as a major work of dramatic art, though many have taken opposing stances regarding its actual message. In this play, Ibsen makes many hints about the roles of society and how the female was treated in the 19th century. Women were expected to remain subservient to their fathers and husbands at that time. Their occupational choices were also extremely limited. Middle and upper-class women generally remained home, caring for their children and running the household.

Audiences and critics were enthusiastic about Ibsen's new stage play when it

opened, though his agent in Germany expressed misgivings about the ending. This was a time of intellectual and social turbulence and revolution in Europe; the Danish translation by George Brandes of John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* had appeared in 1869 and Mill and Ibsen described the social and moral suffering caused to men and women by the prevailing inflexible patriarchy. From this perspective, women's issues were symptomatic of society's problems, which were highlighted by Ibsen 'through individual destinies and confrontations' shown through the character Nora in *A doll's house* (Hemmer 82).

It is not surprising that through *A Doll's House* Ibsen was soon known as the creator of the 'first real "feminist" character in the history of theater' (Calvani 1). Joan Templeton points out that Ibsen was very much involved with women's rights at that time. Joan Templeton writes about the women in Ibsen's plays in "The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen", he sees *A Doll's House* as:

'[...] Ibsen's most explicit treatment of the women question. The conflict is between society's demand that Nora embraces the women's role that it has determined for her – "Before all else, you're a wife and mother" – and her refusal in the name of her autonomy: "I believe that, before all else, I'm a human being". Nora does not leave the dollhouse to find some other role in society, but, on the contrary, to discover the self she refused in living a role.' (Templeton 325)

Another critic Unni Langås says, 'Ibsen changes the focus of the nineteenth-century gender debate and ideology from nature to culture, from being to acting. Nora's experiences do not reveal the female nature, but how the culturally constructed norms of the time produce notions of femaleness and govern her life as a woman' (Langås 166).

Whatever the view is taken of Nora's actions and the overall message of the play, it is generally accepted that it describes the social, emotional, and spiritual restrictions imposed on women by the society of the late 19th century and that part of Nora's battle (whether personal or symbolic) is to become aware of these restrictions and to confront the artificial environment which had been created around her. In this context, Alexander Herzen had identified the issues involved in *My Past and Thoughts*:

'A sober view of human relationships is far harder for women than for us; [...] they are more deceived by education and know less of life, and so they more often stumble and break their heads and hearts than free themselves. They are always in revolt, and remain in slavery; they strive for revolution, and more than anything they support the existing regime.' (Herzen 439)

These words might well be applied to Nora and to Mrs. Linde, the effort of

awareness needed by women if they were to extricate themselves from this vicious circle. Gail Finney points out that in *A Doll's House* 'in closing the door on her husband and children, Nora opened the way to the turn-of-the-century women's movement' (Finney 91).

Another critic Kristin Ørjasæter remarks that 'in *A Doll's House* Ibsen offers one picture of the path to the future when women represent humanity too and freedom stands equal chances for men and woman alike. By having Nora exit the doll's house and leave the child-woman role, the play breaks with a destructive female ideal' (Ørjasæter 42). A reading of *A Doll's House* which focuses on the restrictions in Nora's lifestyle and her emancipation from a patriarchal society is over-simplistic and ignores the existence of many other factors. From such an approach, it is not possible to decide whether Nora is a result of her circumstances, an active manipulator of her situation, or a victim of external forces. Taking a Marxist¹ point of view, she is a victim, entrapped in the values of capitalism, while from first- and second-wave feminist perspectives², she is still a victim, this time of a male-oriented society that is unable (or unwilling) to accommodate the female point of view.

A long chain of events sets off the resistance shown by Nora. Once she begins thinking she can escape creating a better life for herself, there is no changing her mind. Closing the door behind is the explosion of her energies against patriarchy. It's a challenge to a patriarchal society. It's a bold act of revolt against male domination. She rejects the traditional institution of marriage which only confines women. Feminists and women's rights activists like James Huenker, Olivia Freeman have enthusiastically welcomed Nora's final words, and academic commentators like Ronald Gray, Shannon Cron have concluded that she has finally discovered that her 'happiness was based on a much more comprehensive masquerade than the one she had invented' (Hemmer 82).

From the feminist discussion (by many critics) of the play above, generally, it seems that women are capable of being independent and self-ruling. But deep concentration on the issue makes it clear that even in the modern age women cannot liberate themselves from the male ruling society. They cannot upgrade their status. When Nora realizes that she is playing the role of a doll in her house and before that she was a doll in the hand of her father, she suddenly faces her epiphany. She realizes that this is not her true self and to find herself she has to leave the house and see the outer world. Accordingly, she leaves the house leaving behind her husband and three children rejecting the institutions of marriage, motherhood, above all the tradition of the society.

¹Marxism recognizes that women are oppressed, and attributes the oppression to the capitalist/private property system.

²Feminist history can be divided into three waves. The first wave, occurring in the 19th and early 20th century, was mainly concerned with women's right to vote. The second wave, at its height in the 1960s and 1970s, refers to the women's liberation movement for equal legal and social rights. The third wave, beginning in the 1990s, refers to a continuation of, and a reaction to, second-wave feminism.

The upsetting and harsh reality is that though women are struggling to escape from their inhuman condition and develop their status, this male-dominated society will never let them arise. Now and forever social force will dominate women and whatever attempt they may take they will be defeated and if they revolt, they will have to suffer for long, they will be forced out of the house and the society.

Different works (stories, plays, etc.) on feminism discussed above including *A Doll's House* exemplify the feminist movement by a number of scholars for the rights of women in every aspect. In every era of history, there were some feminists to raise the voice for the right of women and protest the domination of the male society over women. These works on feminism explore the treatment of women throughout human history. From the ancient Greek and Roman civilization to the present world, women are being considered inferior to men and in some aspects as subhuman. Some societies treat women as slaves and sometimes worse than animals. There were always some people revolting against this condition and could only develop the condition slightly than before.

Connections can be found among these feminist works as all of these speak about women, about their rights, about their worst position in society, about their struggle. By reviewing these works, it becomes comprehensible that in every age, in every society female was dominated by male even in this modern age. Even now, in this 21st century, women are being raped, in some countries, female children do not get proper education, they are getting married off in childhood, in a word, and women are being dominated and oppressed by the male governing society. There is no way out for women from this trap of the world except death (Beauvoir 647) as Kate Chopin states and conveys the message in her short story *The Story of an Hour*.

Conclusion

In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen portrays the bleak picture of a role held by women of all economic classes that is sacrificial. The female characters in the play back Nora's assertion and quest for independence. Though Nora is economically advantaged, in comparison to the other female characters, she leads a hard life because society dictates that Torvald be the marriage's dominant member. Moreover, in this play, other female characters also seem more self-dependent and take the actions they like but when it is analyzed it becomes understandable that they are forced to do so. Ibsen's play was a pioneering work, reflecting the situation of women in a patriarchal society. Though Nora dreams of being independent, she realizes that patriarchy as a system is deep-rooted.

Note

1. Marxism recognizes that women are oppressed, and attributes the oppression to the capitalist/private property system.

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