



# LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

## **Patriarchal Subterfuge Vs Feminist Rebuttal in Henrick Ibsen's *A Doll's House***

**Ms. V. Meenakshi**

Researcher, Department of English, Bharathidasan University Constituent  
College for Women, Orathanad, Tamil Nadu, India.

### **Abstract**

For centuries, human experience has been synonymous with the masculine experience, and the collective image of humaneness has been one-sided and incomplete. Women's experience has interested only man as it has involved himself, and he has defined her experience on the basis of his encounters with the women in both his real life and his fantasy life. Man's interpretation of women's nature has stereotypes that have served as models for generations of women, but man's understanding has been that of subject analyzing object; women has not been defined as a subject in her own right. This paper makes a study of patriarchal subterfuge and feminist counteraction in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

### **Keywords**

Patriarchy; Feminism; Subterfuge; Henrick Ibsen; *A Doll's House*.



Patriarchy as an ideology has created a world in which women are always inferior to men. Before the word feminism appeared in 1890s, women had been unconsciously put under the control of men and only few of them were capable to fight this ideology in order to gain their own rights as human beings. Women fare badly in a society where economic and social functions are almost exclusively male prerogatives. Ibsen has condemned modern society saying that it is not a human society but only a society of men. The clash between the self-seeking world of men and the love and humanity represented by women is crucial in Ibsen's drama. Ibsen's women are not judged by specific good actions as opposed to bad ones, but rather by the good faith they bring to their acts.

The controversial play *A Doll House* by Henrik Ibsen has received many critical reviews due to the social disintegration it highlights. Ibsen's play is a narrative about the marriage of a young couple that fails because they are unable to communicate and understand one another. Critics feast on the actions of the characters and the outcome of the play. What many critics like to discuss is Ibsen's overall intentions in the production of the play and the focus on the character's personalities. The character of Torvald the husband, being a controlling and possessive man, is but a product of society from the time during which the play was written (Shaw 1). Torvald Helmer's character, which may seem to the simple mind to be that of an ideal husband, is quite the contrary if one takes a closer look. Most critics agree that Nora's actions were drastic, but few like to pay the due attention to what brought about her response.

Nora's new truth made *A Doll's House* one of the greatest scandals in literary history. It inspired countless attacks in newspapers and magazines which reviled Ibsen as indecent and godless and Nora as unwomanly and perverted. At the same time, the play became a rallying text for the nascent movements for women's rights in the U.S and Europe. *A Doll's House* is now regarded as a central text for modern feminism, and Nora has become a feminist icon.

However important *A Doll's House* has been for feminism, it is fashionable in the world of Ibsen scholarship to claim that the play is not feminist. Favorite arguments are that *A Doll's House* is really about the transformation of the individual self, not of the female self; that Nora's husband, Torvald, is as much a victim of society's expectations as Nora is; and that Ibsen was not a writer of tracts, but of literature, whose subject is universal human experience in which feminism, or any other "ism", has no place.

If Nora's sex does not matter in *A Doll's House*, then her conflict has essentially nothing to do with her identity as a nineteenth century married woman, or a woman. In other words, she could just as well be a man. But make her as a man, and the play becomes not only ludicrous but impossible. Torvald Helmer is a product of society's expectations, he is the figure of male authority against whom Nora struggles. The action of the play's last scene, the famous confrontation between wife and husband for whose sake Ibsen said he wrote the whole play, is the conflict between Torvald's insistence that Nora's most "sacred duties" are to her husband and children and Nora's conviction that she has "equally sacred duties" to herself. As for the argument that *A Doll's House* is about human beings, not issues of social movements, this is true, but this is also what makes the play quintessentially feminist. Unlike, pandemic venereal disease, corrupt business practices, euthanasia, government scandals, and other issues that preoccupied Ibsen's world, women, feminism insists, are not issues but people. Nora will leave the doll house to try, as she says, to become a person. Nora Helmer is Ibsen's best-loved character, and her journey from playing a part to asserting a self is among the most prized roles in the dramatic repertory world-wide.

The need for individual freedom is the central theme of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. The bondage of domestic duty and an uncritical acceptance of social responsibility are the real stumbling blocks to the growth and maturity of the heroine's personality. Their struggle within a patriarchal culture is a process of emancipation by ordeal. *A Doll's House* is chiefly a study of women's status

within marriage. Nora is everywoman. Her bondage and subservient status is evident from her unsuspecting acceptance of pet names like 'little spendthrift' 'little skylark' given by her condescending husband, implying a relationship between a patron and protégé. It is fear and deference that lead Nora to suppress her act of forging her father's signature to raise an emergent loan for her husband's medical treatment. Nora overstrains herself to pay off this secret loan and even spends agonizing days under the threat of a black-mailer, expecting her husband to be grateful for such a sacrifice.

The women are very good at rebelling against the norms. Nora and Kristine both do things that they know would be "wrong" according to their society, their religion, and how they were raised but rather than comply, these women use their intelligence and their wits to hide the things that they have done in order to keep things appearing above board. Both of these women are strong and defy all those cultural norms in order to keep going and to survive in the world. Nora forges her father's signature and borrows money in order to save her husband's life, then she works secretly behind his back in order to make back the money that she thinks that he will claim responsibility and pay off the loan himself, thereby protecting her. When she sees what he really does, she is shocked into reality. The reality of what her marriage is and the things she is thinking and feeling upset and confuse her. She realize that she must be on her own for a while at least to figure out who she is, what she believes, and how she should go on with her life knowing what she knows. This epiphany, in itself, is against the rules of society. A woman who leaves her husband becomes an outcast. Ibsen himself was once asked what he thought happened to Nora after she left and he replied that she ended up broke and desolate, dying in a back alley somewhere. Unfortunately, this was reality for real life women and became one of those social issues that Ibsen tried to bring attention to.

Nora was expected to act in a certain way and fulfil her role as wife and mother. Her reputation and what other people think and feel about her are extremely important to her and to her husband. Because she has lived a fantasy

for so long, she never even gets to know her husband. In fact, she is only her true self with Dr. Rank. With him she has honest, open, intelligent conversation and lets him get to know who she really is. She lets him get to know her in a way that her husband never could because of the structure placed on her head, she realizes that she can't stay with him anymore. She realizes that he is a stranger to her and suddenly she comprehends the magnitude of what society has done to her and millions of women in her shoes. Since these issues of a woman's role are so apparent in this play, it is interesting to see the messages that Ibsen seems to be sending. These roles should be changed because they do a disservice to the woman as well as to the man involved. He seems to be compelling society at large to take a good look at reality, take notice of what is happening and to change; do something about this problem because it simply is not right to go in this way.

Money also plays a big role in this play. Money is used in the Victorian society to keep women dependent. Of course it was just the way of things then. Now we know how women are affected by monetary concerns and how it keeps them bound to situation that would not be necessary if not for the money. We see how Nora uses and abuses the rules when it comes to money. How dare she take out a loan? How perfect of her to spend and spend and keep asking for more. She lets her husband think that she is totally relying on him monetarily, which is the "correct" way of this period but she is also hiding the truth about the money situation. She pretends to be too stupid to understand a budget or monetary concerns but in reality, she is fully aware and in charge in her own way. She manipulates the situation to keep up the appearance of being naive and stupid when it comes to money. She knows her role well.

The women lets the man decide because he is the man. Even when the woman knows better she simply backs off due to propriety. Today it may be stunning and insulting but in Victorian times it simply was the norm. Ibsen does show us that the women in his plays aren't quite so willing to be dominated though. They have a tendency to rebel as seen above. Helmer tends to try to act

as Nora's master. He feels that his word is law and it is his right and even duty to demand what and Nora complies of course, if only outwardly.

The women are quite smart and instead of being open and proud of that fact, they use these characteristics as subterfuge and manipulate to get their way instead of being proud and openly intelligent. They work tirelessly to keep up a façade so that these qualities are hidden and all will still appear "proper" to society at large. It is quite sad. Helmer even makes reference to Nora's lack of intelligence on numerous occasions and steps in to "help".

Helmer treats Nora as his property. He calls her little pet names and spends time trying to coax her into doing his bidding. He thinks of himself as the master and her as his to do with what he chooses.

Nora cares very much about how she looks. She knows that her appearance is pleasing to Helmer so it works to her advantages to look nice. Women had to use what they had at their disposal and Nora knows that with Helmer her looks helped her a lot. She spends a lot of time catering to his preferences and tastes so that she would be most appealing to him. Nora's work is very important to her. She finds it very stimulating and gratifying but it is something that she keeps hidden as if she is committing a crime. She doesn't allow anyone except for Mrs. Linde to know about it because of the scandal it would cause and the perception it would create that Helmer isn't a good provider and that Nora isn't normal to enjoy such beastly things. The truth is that her work gave her a measure of accomplishment and she liked it.

Helmer's desires and that of society are the main focus of this piece of work. It is not until the end of the play that she realizes that she doesn't even know what she wants in life. She was brought up never to think about that.

*A Doll's House* is most definitely a feminist themed play and should be heralded as such. Ibsen didn't mean to call a women's role in society into question but then proceeded to have his Nora rebel and challenged that role over and over again so many times. He was simply relating to the plight of women before they realized that they themselves should be questioning it.

Torvald's use of "my," "me," "mine," and "I" used throughout the play displays his position of control. In dealing with his wife like a child, by promoting her childish behaviors and binding her to demeaning rules and actions, Torvald displays his domineering attitude (Downs 147). After her secret is revealed and his composure regained, he tries to pretend that everything is back to normal and feels that "he is generously returning her to her status as wife and mother" (Downs 194). After he patronizes her again, she tries to stand up for herself and he, authoritatively replies, "You're insane! You've no right! I forbid you" (Ibsen 129).

Early in the scene Torvald expresses his possessiveness with his assertive words and his asinine pet names, "my little lark" and "my squirrel" (Ibsen 96-97) and are used repeatedly throughout. All through the play he refers to his wife, as an object of his possession: "Can't I look at my richest treasure? At all that beauty that's mine, and mine alone-completely and utterly" (Ibsen 25). His words are demeaning in reference to her as her own being. After Torvald has discovered her blunder and realizes that he will not suffer any repercussions for Nora's actions; he calmly covets her in a possessive fashion saying, "I'll keep you like a hunted dove...she's become his wife and his child as well...from now on that's what you'll be to me [a child as well]-you little, bewildered, helpless thing" (Ibsen 45). Torvald fails to realize that Nora is her own person; that can think for herself and has her own needs and wants.

To the defense of Helmer (not signifying that he is correct, but) one must consider the time, social structure and statement made by William Archer in his critical review, "If Helmer helped to make Nora a doll, Nora helped to make Helmer a prig." In looking at the entire situation the reader might see how Nora could be slightly at fault for allowing it to have gone this far and not having stood up for herself sooner. It might be easier to consume Torvald's fit of rage as more of a justifiable reaction considering that Nora had just ruined his social stature, one in which he had worked long and hard for (Downs 131). If a person were to put oneself in that same situation during the same time of such social roles, one

might deem that his reaction was not so horrible. Also as critic Harold Clurman highlights in his critical analysis of the play that Torvald's remarks about a mother of bad temperament having negative effects on her children, is a statement that is indeed true in its nature. Torvald was just stating what is believed to be factual and true, even today. Children learn bad habits from examples of parenting. For every undesirable trait that Torvald displays, one can find an underlying excuse for his disposition through looking at his society.

At the time when the play was written such a callous ending was frowned upon, thus the ending has often been altered in various plays, but what makes this play so amazing is that it is based on a factual story. It is a story that represent more than just a dysfunctional marriage but a coming of time. It makes the reader or spectator come to the realization that life is not always good and stories do not always have blissful endings. Society's strongholds on character and his natural possessive and controlling nature establish Torvald's character. Which in the end causes him to lose control completely, as his wife leaves him. As Shaw states in his critical conclusion, "At last even he understands what was really happened."

In *A Doll's House*, Nora Helmer carries her conditioning as wife and mother to its logical extreme and breaks the law to save her husband's life. Thrilled and challenged by the opportunity to prove her love for him, Nora nevertheless expects that Torvald will as gladly offer up his life for her if she herself is threatened with danger. When he fails to do this, Nora realizes that she has overestimated both her worth within her marriage and her husband's moral measure. Disillusioned and , regarding her children, shaken by the revelation of her naivety and ignorance, her social inconsequentiality and the possible abnormality the isolation of her rebelliousness forces her to consider in herself, Nora leaves her home and family to educate herself about the workings of the world.

The real point of the play is Nora's growth from Everywoman in the First Act to a New Woman in the last. Her revolt is two-fold: she refuses to live with a



husband who withdraws his support at the greatest crisis of her life. She also revolts against the biased law which precludes a wife from raising a loan on her own. Her best efforts to play the ideal wife and mother to retain his job Helmer's bank even after the detection of his forgery.

Nora, despite her most assertive and mature decision, is a long-term victim of patriarchal culture. Her subordinate status is to some extent her own making: She delights in puerile epithets like 'little songbird' and 'little rogue' and always strives to live up to her husband's taste and expectation. It is only at the moment of her greatest trial that she realizes that her overprotective husband would not share the disgrace of her scandalous forgery. Thus the deferential Nora develops into a mature woman in search of an identity. She spurns every offer of reconciliation with her egotist husband as realization dawns on her that a real marriage based on equal status and mutual respect is impossible- 'a miracle of miracles'.

### **Works Cited**

- Ibsen, Henrik. *Four Major Plays Volume I*. USA: Signet Classics, 1992. Print.
- Downs, Brian W., *Ibsen: Intellectual Background*. London: CUP, 1946. Print.
- Shaw, Bernard. *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. London, Constable, 1913. Print.
- Templeton, Joan. *Ibsen's Women*. London: CUP, 1997. Print.

### **MLA (7th Edition) Citation:**

Meenakshi, V. "Patriarchal Subterfuge Vs Feminist Rebuttal in Henrick Ibsen's *A Doll's House*." *Literary Quest* 1.5 (2014): 83-91. Web. DoA.

### **DoA – Date of Access**

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.