

# The Theme of Emancipation of Self in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

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## Abstract:

Henrik Ibsen was an extremely influential Norwegian playwright who stood responsible for the rise of the modern realistic drama. In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen employs the themes and structures of classical tragedy while writing in prose about every day, unexceptional people. . They do not understand each other but in practical life woman is judged by masculine law, as though she is not a woman but man. A woman cannot be herself in modern society. It is an exclusively male society with laws made by men and women are judged based on masculine stand point. In this study an attempt is made to know the sacrificial role played by Nora the heroine of this play and symbolic suffering of all women. It also focuses on the suppression of women and how women struggle to overcome the confines of traditional roles.

**Keywords:** Suppression, Womanhood, Emancipation.

*A Doll's House*, a realistic three-act play, focuses on late nineteenth century life in a middle-class Scandinavian household, in which the wife is expected to be contentedly passive and the husband paternally protective. Nora Helmer once secretly borrowed a large sum of money so that her husband could recuperate from a serious illness. She never told him of this loan and has been secretly paying it back in small instalments by saving from her household allowance. Her husband, Torvald thinks her careless and childlike and often calls her his doll. Nora tries to influence her husband, but he thinks of Nora as a simple child who cannot understand the value of money or business.

*A Doll's House* manifests Ibsen's concern for women's rights and for human rights in general. It has two kinds of moral laws, two kinds of conscience, one for men and other for women. Nora appears to be happy with her husband, the lawyer Torvald Helmer and their three children, two sons and a daughter. When the play begins, it is Christmas eve and Nora has returned home after doing her Christmas shopping. The affectionate exchanges between her and her husband suggest that they are still very much in love after eight years of marriage. It is clear through the thinking of Helmer that Nora is rather careless with his money. She is elated because he has recently been appointed as Manager of a bank.

The play is divided into three acts. In the first act, we are first introduced to the two women characters of the play, Nora Helmer, the heroine and Christine Linde her old friend and come to know about their past and present life.

Then we are introduced to Doctor Rank and Krogstad the villain of the piece. Then follows a talk among Nora, Helmer and Christine in the course of which Helmer promises Nora's friend Christine Linde job in his bank. Then from the ensuing conversation between Nora and Krogstad we come to know about Nora's secret loan from him and her forgery of her father's signature on the bond signed to Krogstad. The act ends with Nora brooding on the influence of bad mothers on their children as well as threat posed by Krogstad.

In the second act, we come to know about Nora's nurse having forsaken her daughter and Nora's hint to her that the nurse may have to look after her children too just as she did with motherless Nora, Nora's request to Helmer to retain in his post and Helmer's egotistic rashness in dismissing him through his orders precipitating the crisis of Nora in the following act.

In the third act, we are led to know about the meeting between Linde and Krogstad and their decision to marry. Then we have a glimpse of Helmer's unsuccessful efforts to woo his wife Nora. We are then presented with the dignified exit of Doctor Rank from the Helmers and the world. The final episode is between Nora and Helmer after Helmer having read Krogstad's letter exposing Nora. This in turn enables Nora to see the real character of her husband which makes her take the sudden decision to sever all her ties with him abruptly and walk out of his home.

Ibsen makes numerous hints about the roles of women and how the female gender was treated at the time. *A Doll's House* is considered to be the first feminist play, challenging the Victorian ideal of a woman's role in marriage. In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen paints a bleak picture of the sacrificial role held by women of all economic classes in this society. The play is significant for its critical attitude towards nineteenth century marriage norms. It aroused great controversy at the time, as it concludes with the protagonist, Nora, leaving her husband and children because she wants to discover herself. Ibsen was 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. Nora initially seems like a playful, naïve child who lacks knowledge of the world outside her home. She realized that she has acted the part of the happy, child-like wife for Torvald and before that she has acted the part of the happy, child-like daughter for her father. She now sees that her father and Torvald compelled her to behave in a certain way and understands it to be great wrong that stunted her development as an adult and as a human being. She has made nothing of her life because she has existed only to please men.

But Nora is a woman with unlimited potential. She will not be able to attain her self-realisation and selfhood until she leaves home to stop being a doll. She has not been allowed to be her true self both by her father and her husband and as both have treated her like a doll, she has to play the doll throughout. Nora has never left home. She was confined in her father's home and to do what he wanted. She then goes directly to her husband Torvald Helmer's home where she is treated as a child. She is protected, petted, patted, dressed up, given pocket money, but she is not allowed to be herself. She has no experience of life outside her homes. She leads her life only as a doll which is keyed by her father before marriage and by her husband after marriage. The title of this play shows that there is a relationship with the theme of home.

The play also focuses on the principle theme of marriage which is based on perfect understanding between the couples and not mere in wealthy life or some other facts. The marriage is not based on illusions or phantasies or a mere show it is all about the two minds which is going to dwell into a single soul. Marriage should not consider to be a doll house it is a human institution.

Nora, the female protagonist of *The Doll's House*, acts as Ibsen's mouthpiece of the woman emancipation. Ibsen himself said that the intention of the play was to show an individual's liberation from the shackles and restraints of society. Nora leads the traditional role of a puppet wife and a doll- mother for the sake of gaining self-liberation, individuality and independence. The play tries to probe the true base of the man-woman relationship in its most intimate forms of marriage. Nora is perfectly aware of outsider's opinion about her.

Nora is a doll in the hands of three persons, namely Torvald Helmer, Krogstad and her father. Nora is judged from the eyes of men. To them, she has committed forgery and is a cheat but it is not so. She has done everything only for the betterment of her family. Not even a single room is given for her wish or her passion or her emotion; rather she is treated as a puppet, whose acts are controlled by their masters.

The play *A Doll's House* advocates the rights of women and especially of wives in relation to her husband's. The final decision of Nora the protagonist of the play shows her sufferings she has come across in her life-time. She doesn't want to ruin her life by committing herself towards the family in the namesake of parents, husband, children and the society. She had believed that someday a miracle would happen and he would prove that he too was capable of making a sacrifice of her, but she has found that the miracle did not happen. She takes back her wedding – ring and steps out of the house, slamming the outer door behind her. *A Doll's House* has a great relevance in the present age when man has lost his intuitive, feminine self, hence the increasing materialism and masculinity in today's modern world. The intuition of oneself is to be with their own self identity. Society is set up by ourselves for our convenience and not for the sake of others. The ultimate message of this play in my point of view is to be what you want to be.