



## “A Marxist Feminist Analysis Of Public - Private Dichotomy In Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* And Shakespeare’s *The Merchant Of Venice*”

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the role of women and their rights by bringing about a comparative analysis of the two main texts – Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. The thesis highlights in them the Marxism approach and criticism where wealth and class oppression become the main concern of the major female characters Nora of *A Doll’s House* and Portia of *The Merchant of Venice*. The work will study *A Doll’s House* and *The Merchant of Venice* from a larger structure, i.e., the Public Private Dichotomy of the Marxism Theory.

**Index Terms** - Marxism, Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll’s House*, William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, public-private dichotomy, comparative study, feminism, identity.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

“*The oppressed are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class are to represent and repress them*”. (Karl Marx)

The gendered notion in the society leads to the belief that the works of public interest are for the performance of the male and the female is confined to the household works and the private sphere. The patriarchal society believes that the private sphere’s works are of no use. Women being considered to be confined only to the private sphere, therefore their status is also inferior to that of men. This paper will focus how, Ibsen while writing the play portrayed the character of Nora in such a way where woman had always been kept in the private sphere; where woman acted passively as they were expected not to go outside their houses and child bearing and child rearing was their main role in the family. In the same manner, though we know that Shakespeare for his portrayal of strong female characters; he showed Portia in the disguise of a male lawyer in the court room, rather than showing her up with her real identity or as a female lawyer. She has been devoid of her right to choose her life partner as per the will made by her father. Both the female characters are a representation- of everyone, no matter their background, for freedom.

*A Doll’s House* is written by Henrik Ibsen in Norwegian language in 1879. It has also established a new genre of modern drama. On the other hand, Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* is a 16<sup>th</sup>-century play, which shows the conflict between self interest and love.

The study of *A Doll’s House* and *The Merchant of Venice* from a Marxist perspective in relation to Public Private Dichotomy shows us that women has no authority to be aware of their own rights. She is devoid of her identity and dignity. When it comes to the equal status between men and women, the public private dichotomy rightly explains this exploitation. This paper will therefore focus to understand the behavior of both male and female human being; while socializing their activity and gender biasness.

Feminism is a movement, raised in 1960s in the favor of women’s rights in the society. When the behavior of women has been analyzed through the man’s perspective in the play then it can be considered as a feminist play. But it can also be observed that the reader has many other perspective; one of them is the Public Private Dichotomy. Central to this idea men dominate the “Public Sphere” whereas women were essentially relegated to the “Private Sphere”.

Public Private Dichotomy refer to a social phenomena, within modern societies that feature, to some degree an empirical separation between a domestic and private sphere, public and social sphere. In Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* we find Nora, the protagonist of the play as someone who can only do light fancy work and was relegated only to the private

sphere. Also, in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the protagonist, Portia is shown how she disguised as a male lawyer to save Antonio. Portia, though considered as the hero of the play; gives us the sense that females were always relegated to the private sphere and not given the opportunity to come up freely with their real identity in the public sphere, as who they are.

## 2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This paper aims to study the position of women in the society as presented in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) and William Shakespeare *The Merchant of Venice* (between 1596-1599). The discussion will give the readers a broad information about the condition of women in 16<sup>th</sup>-century and 19<sup>th</sup>-century. This paper will also study the dichotomy made by the society between man and woman in the Public and the Private sphere; where women were always relegated to home and family, and the men always gets the superior position in the society with their identity with wealth and power – and women were never allowed to reveal their real identity in the Public.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The study of this work is based on primary and secondary sources.

- **Primary Data:** The primary data are the main data obtained in the novel. The primary data sources of the study is *A Doll's House*, play by Ibsen and *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare

**Secondary Data:** The secondary data are the criticisms and the articles related to the novel. The secondary data of the study are taken from any information on the novel, *A Doll's House* and *The Merchant of Venice*.

It is a qualitative research with focus on the public-private dichotomy of the Marxist Theory i.e., The Marxist Feminist Analysis of the Public Private Dichotomy. Moreover, the theory of gender studies and feminism is also used as a reference in this paper to study the main difference between the gender inequality and gender identity. Public Private Dichotomy refers to the idea men dominating the Public sphere, whereas, women were always relegated to the Private sphere. Public-Private Dichotomy is a concept propounded by Marxist Feminist Thought. In the contemporary times, this division becomes highly gendered as men dominate every aspect of Public spheres and women were confined within the four walls of the house and in family only. This Public-Private division is a means of discrimination between men and women. Feminist thinkers; mainly the Marxist Feminist Thinkers criticized the exploitation of women on the basis of Public-Private distinction. According to them, the private sphere works are not supposed to be productive, but the private work and public production system are closely interconnected. Therefore, considering women as non-workers is unjust. Friedrich Engels in his work "Origins of family, private property and the State" talks about this process of deterioration of women's status.

## 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 4.1. Marxist Feminist analysis of Public Private Dichotomy.

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## 5. RESEARCH GAP

*A Doll's House* is known as one of the inspirational book by Ibsen; as Ibsen is best known for his female characters. Also, *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare is well known for his portrayal of female character – as an independent being. Many scholars and researchers believe that this two plays were about two women who at first seems like a subservient woman, and at the end comes up as an independent woman. This research aims to find the following propositions:-

-To analyze, why Ibsen though called a male feminist writer portrayed Nora always in the Private sphere and not given her the opportunity to rise up in the Public sphere from the first act of the play.

-If Shakespeare is best known for his portrayal of strong female characters; then why he had portrayed Portia in the disguise of a male lawyer rather than showing her in her real identity.

## 6. BACKGROUND

*A Doll's House* takes place in nineteenth century Norway, following a period of great economic boom for the century, and growth and prosperity for the upper middle class, like Ibsen portrays with the characters Nora and Trovald. The nineteenth century Norwegian society supported and even reinforced the patriarchal ideal within marriage, making women virtually powerless and rendering them dependent upon their husband economically, socially, and psychologically, especially in regard to the institutions of marriage and motherhood. During this era, women were considered to be inferior to men, and they were expected only to be housewives and mothers who selflessly dedicated themselves to the servitude of their husbands and family. Ibsen says, "A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view".

The play is significant for the way it deals with the fate of a married woman, who at the time [in Norway](#) lacked reasonable opportunities for self-fulfillment in a male-dominated world, despite the fact that Ibsen denies it was his intent to write a feminist play. It aroused a great sensation at the time, and caused a "storm of outraged controversy" that went beyond the theatre to the world newspapers and society.

*The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare was probably written in either 1596 or 1597. The Italian setting and marriage plot of *The Merchant of Venice* are typical of Shakespeare's earlier comedies, but the character of Portia, Shakespeare's first great heroine, and the unforgettable villain Shylock elevate this play to a new level. Throughout the play, Shakespeare develops Portia's character from what seems like a subservient woman, who is forced into a marriage, to an independent woman. The arranged marriage shows that Portia was given no freedom by her dominant father. The voice of women in this era is shunned behind men's forefront presence. The loss of the genius women hold and the beauty they possess will never be regained due to the age old sexist attitude that men are better than women. Portia is representation of this loss as we see that not only is she intellectual, but she is the most highly educated in the court room as she solely saves Antonio's life when Bassanio, Gratiano and even the Duke could not save Antonio. If she were to be allowed as a female into the court she would rule the room, and this loss of genius and the justice she is able to provide proves that women's history is a meager one of oppression and obedience. Male Power and Patriarchy is well reflected in this play. Men are the powerful figures in the family and in society, which is why Queen Elizabeth is so unusual. We see many examples of the restriction of women in this play. Portia and Nerissa are confined to Belmont – we never see women in Venice. When Portia and Nerissa leave they have to dress up as men. Similarly Jessica has to dress up as a man to break free from Shylock but in so doing she simply puts herself in the control of another man – Lorenzo.

## 7. ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Henrik Johan Ibsen (March 20, 1828 to May 23, 1906) is a Norwegian playwright and theatre director. As one of the founders of modernism in theatre, Ibsen is often referred to as "the father of realism" and one of the most influential playwrights of this time. Discontinuing his education, Ibsen turned to playwriting and journalism. In Christiania, he penned his first play, *Catiline* (1849), written in blank verse about the failure of Catiline's conspiracy against ancient Rome in the time of Cicero. It sold only 45 copies and was rejected by every theater to which Ibsen submitted it for performance. Ibsen also spent time analyzing and criticizing modern Norwegian literature. In 1862, he was exiled in/to Italy, where he wrote the tragedy *Brand*. In 1868, Ibsen moved to Germany, where he wrote one of his famous works: the play *A Doll's House*. In 1890, he wrote *Hedda Gabler*, creating one of the theatre's most notorious characters. Ibsen's works have held up over the years because he tapped into universal themes and explored the human condition in a way unlike any of those before him. *The Wild Duck* (1884) is considered Ibsen's finest work, and it is certainly the most complex. It tells the story of Gregers Werle, a young man who returns to his hometown after an extended exile and is reunited with his boyhood friend Hjalmar Ekdal. Furthermore, while Hjalmar spends his days working on a wholly imaginary "invention", his wife is earning the household income.

His later works seem to have a more self-reflective quality with mature lead characters looking back and living with the consequences of their earlier life choices. And each drama seems to end on a dark note. The first play written after his return to Norway was *The Master Builder*. The title character encounters a woman from his past who encourages him to make good on a promise. In *When We Dead Awaken*, written in 1899, an old sculptor runs into one of his former models and tries to recapture his lost creative spark. It proved to be his final play. In 1900, Ibsen had a series of strokes that left him unable to write.

William Shakespeare (26 April 1564 – 23 April 1616) was an English poet, playwright, and actor, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's greatest dramatist. Shakespeare wrote his earlier plays in the traditional style of time. He relied heavily on drawn out - sometimes extravagant – metaphors and narcissisms. Shakespeare's representation of women, and the ways in which female roles are interpreted and enacted, have become topics of scholarly interest. Shakespeare's heroines encompass a wide range of characterizations and types, from the uncompromising frankness to the quick wit.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *As You Like It*, and one of his most famous tragedies, *Romeo and Juliet*. These plays do not just fill hearts with joy, but they are plays that you can relate to no matter what your age is. Some represented real life problems. Shakespeare's reputation has grown considerably since his own time. Not only is William a famous writer, he's a hero too. Shakespeare produced most of his known works between 1589 and



1613. His early plays were primarily comedies and histories and are regarded as some of the best work produced in these genres. Until about 1608, he wrote mainly tragedies, among them *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Machbeth*, all considered to be among the finest works in the English language.

## 8. DISCUSSION

### 8.1. Public Private Dichotomy: A Marxist Feminist Analysis

In contemporary feminist theory, the fundamental distinction between Public and Private is understood to be based on subordination and oppression on women. Therefore, they have rejected the traditional notion of separation of Public and Private spheres. According to the supporters of Marxist approach of feminism, patriarchal system is the contribution of capitalism. Private property contributes to economic inequality, dependence, political and domestic struggle between men and women. In the patriarchal society, especially in the capitalist one, public-private shows two separate areas. Public activities were undertaken by men. On the other hand, women have been mostly restricted to Private activities and are subjected to the authority of men. In the Private sphere, the household activities which are performed by women usually do not have the direct contribution to national production due to which their performances are supposed to be of no value. As such, this Public Private Dichotomy changes the status of women from equal productive members of society to subordinate and dependent human being. Fredrick Angels in his work *origins of Family Private Property and the State*, talks about this process of deterioration of women's status.

Another significant concern regarding Public Private Dichotomy is the gender stereotypes of the patriarchal society. Gender stereotype is a generalized view or perception about attributes or the rules that are to be performed by men and women. Gender Stereotypes are very influential because it psychologically controls or appropriates the behavior of human being. It is harmful when it limits women's or men's ability to develop their own capabilities. Thus, with gender socialization, women often tend to internalize that their activities should be limited to the Private sphere.

The feminist thinkers like Carole Pateman, Alaxendre Kollontai have argued that, women, like any other individuals are free and equal human beings. Therefore, their emancipation and empowerment can be achieved while realizing them from the hierarchical relations between Private and Public Sphere. The Marxist Feminist raised questions on Public Private Dichotomy such as where and why this dividing line is being drawn between these spheres and whether there is a need to draw this line. They primarily questions and subsequently elucidates how the binary concept of the public opposing the private, in law and society, negatively impacts women's enjoyment of fundamental human rights with specific reference to the harm incurred in cases of domestic abuse. Therefore it is necessary that the dichotomy must be reassessed, modified and reapplied so as to profit all in society.

To conclude, Public Private divide is an important concept of Feminism and Marxist Feminist thinkers have made a sincere attempt to analyse this issue. These feminist thinkers claimed that the family is a central part of society's power structure and the chief institution of patriarchy. Within the family, women are exploited domestically, manipulated emotionally and abused sexually. It is here that women are exposed to physical violence. It is where early socialization takes place, where gender identities are formed and reproduced, where sex role is learnt and internalized. Therefore, it is necessary to challenge this dichotomy as it is just an alliance of patriarchy to protect the interest of the dominant group. The Public Private divide can be reduced through women education, political participation and proper legislation. Hence, the second chapter analyses theoretically the notion of gender equality based on Public Private debate in a Patriarchal society referring to the idea of Marxist feminist thinkers.

### 8.2. The Patriarchal influence in the writings

Shakespeare is known for his portrayal of strong female characters. Female characters play an important role for the dramatic run of events in Shakespeare's plays. It seems unlikely that *The Merchant of Venice* is the only one of Shakespeare's plays to challenge the normal perception of women. Many of Shakespeare's other comedic plays have been interpreted by critics for containing a feminist stance on women's issues. *The Taming of the Shrew*, *As You Like It*, and others have been successfully have been argued by scholars to have strong female characters who defy social norms. In spite of the fact that the female characters in many of Shakespeare's plays are extra-ordinary women, yet it is contested whether Shakespeare himself actively attempted to change the social perception of women.

If we try to understand Shakespeare, it is necessary to examine the socio-political circumstances of his lifetime, i.e., the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century. During Elizabethan era, even though the Queen herself was an unmarried woman, the roles of woman in society were extremely restricted. Single women had been the property of their fathers and handed over to their future husbands through marriage. In Elizabethan time, women were considered as the weaker sex and dangerous, because their sexuality was supposedly mystic and therefore feared by men. Women of that era was supposed to represent virtues like- obedience, silence, patience. And this influence has been seen in the writings of Shakespeare; for example- the character of Portia is seen influenced from Shakespeare's mindset. In the play, She is the female protagonist who is more influential and dominating than the male protagonist. But it is seen that a medieval ritual is forced upon her shoulders by her father that whoever solves the riddle choosing the right casket will be married to Portia. Portia, in the name of obedience and patriarchal authority, surrenders to this harsh decision of her father. It is a matter of question why such a sensible and intelligent girl like Portia is forced to follow such a medieval ritual. She must be given rights of choosing her own life partner instead being a play-thing in the hands of destiny. In the play, it is seen that if she breaks the custom it will not only mark her as a disloyal and disobedient daughter but also it will

destroy her dead father's social reputation. So, from the above analysis, we can ascertain from Shakespeare's treatment of the relationship between father and daughter in the play that he was not very courageous enough to break the patriarchal customs of his time.

As far as "A Doll's House" by Ibsen is concerned, according to critics and scholars, Ibsen's play can be viewed as a gallery of portraits of various kinds of men and women through social reality. Ibsen said, "What you call freedom I call liberties; and what I call freedom is nothing is but a constant, active acquisition of the idea of freedom."

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the condition of women and men were not equal. A female individual is assigned with all her duties and obligations directed by patriarchy. But women had to learn self-respect, and to seize more than the few, meager opportunities that patriarchal society had availed them. Women were seen as 'the weaker sex'. This particularly affected middle class women because they had no reason to leave the home or go to work. And, this somehow influenced Ibsen's writing style because though he has been called a male feminist writer: in the play *A Doll's House* through the character of Nora we see a reflection of how the patriarchal system of thinking influenced the writings of that era. The protagonist, Nora is showed as someone submissive: and it is said that the ideal woman should be the 'angel of the house' and support her husband; in the same manner as Nora did. The 19th century patriarchal society controlled the behavior of women. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* highlights several instances where the society forces women to obey their husbands. Obeying husbands is like an addiction, which is hard for women to avoid. Men's dominance is a belief that flows in the blood of almost all women, young and the old. It is a life that women have no choice but adhere to its principles or risk losing their dignity.

Another notable thing in "A Doll's House" is that majority of women as indicated in Ibsen's book are not employed. They depend on their husband's earnings in order to meet their daily needs. Therefore, women remain dominated by men because men act as their 'managers'; without their husbands they cannot maintain their family. Therefore, lack of employment forces women to 'adore' to their husbands. Many of the choices that women make as revealed in Ibsen's book are directly based on societal beliefs. Women have no other choice but adhere to the beliefs of men dominance because without adhering to them they will face a hard time in the society particularly from men.

### 8.3. Identity Crisis

Gender is not a women's issue; rather it is a people's issue. Gender identifies the social relations between men and women. It refers to the relationship between men and women, and how this is socially constructed. Gender roles are dynamic and change over time. The related term with gender is gender equality which is the result of the absence of discrimination and the allocation of resources or benefits or in access to service. While the relevance of women in family, community and society was never in dispute, what role, status and priority women should have seem to be a subject to debate.

Just as in reality, women of Shakespeare's dramas have been bound to rules and conventions of the patriarchal Elizabethan era. The 16<sup>th</sup> century Elizabethan patriarchal conceptions is seen to influence Shakespeare's writings, as for instance we see the problem of identity crisis in many of the female characters in his play *The Merchant of Venice*.

Both the female characters Portia and Jessica have been seen to be devoid of their rights of choosing their desired husband; as we see Portia's dis-satisfaction regarding her father's decision to leave her fate up to the casket test is called into the question. She questions Nerissa about the logic of allowing such an important issue to be decided in this manner when she says, "O me, the word choose! I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father". Moreover, it is showed that when Jessica chooses her husband according to her wishes it is said that she is disobeying God. Both these female characters have been devoid of their identity as a daughter or as an independent human being.

Another incident which clearly shows the theme of identity crisis in this book is when Portia is portrayed by Shakespeare in the disguise of a male lawyer in the court-room. She has been devoid of her right to reveal her real identity as a female lawyer. Not only Portia but Nerissa too was portrayed in disguise of a male lawyer. It is evident from this scene that the practicing in the courtroom as lawyer is to be the activity of the men, not of the women. Here, it is seen that though Portia and Nerissa belonged to different class; but both of them were incapable of showing their identity.

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* clearly depicts this identity crisis in women through the character of Nora where she has been behaved by her husband only as a trophy wife. The loss of identity in Nora is reflected by her husband as he calls her a 'skylark' and a 'squirrel', 'the doll of the house. She is considered as someone who can only do 'light fancy work'. Moreover, the instance which proves the domination of women by men where we see the scenario involving Nora's debt in order to save Helmer's life. She kept this as a secret because women were not allowed to rent money. This is clearly indicated in this line; Mrs Linde: No, a wife cannot borrow without her husband's consent (Ibsen 11). This brings out an image how women were completely dominated by men to an extent that they cannot perform a task or responsibility that is perceived to be for men even for their benefit. It is a belief that does not take into consideration of moral principles. In response to Linde's reaction, Nora tries to convince Linde that it is not wrong for a woman to borrow money for the benefit of husband. She also tries to satisfy Linde that women are not slaves of men but Linde does not seem to agree with her. This also clearly shows that men do not create the belief of men superiority. It is the women who grant men the permission to dominate them.

Again, Nora works under the orders of her husband. This begun from her father and eventually transpired to her husband once she was married. Although Nora seems to enjoy her marriage at the beginning of the play, she lives like a master-slave. She encounters the same treatment that she used to encounter when she was at the hands of her father. Her husband who is supposed to be her savior treats her worse than her father used to treat her. The implication that can be derived from this statement is that the male dominant society will not end because it is passed from generation to generation.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Literature has had a major impact on the development of society. It has shaped civilizations, changed political systems and exposed injustice. Literature gives us a detailed preview of human experiences, allowing us to connect on basic levels of desire and emotion. In an era of modern media, such as television and movies, people are misled into thinking that every question or problem has its quick answer or solution. However, Literature confirms the real complexity of human experience. It provides insight into the minds of other human beings, into the mind of the author and the minds of the character he or she brings to life.

Women have always been a part of literature through the ages. Unfortunately, they have often depicted as weaker, inferior, could not survive on their own, and could not do their work by themselves. According to man, women are beautiful and obedient, could not think on their own. Based on these understandings, this research paper has aimed to understand the prevailing notion of Public Private Dichotomy in western society. The writers or the novelists while writing their masterpieces mostly influenced by the socio-political circumstances of their times. As such, in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* we see the reflection of a stereotypical, a male dominated and patriarchal society where both the female protagonists have been suffering from gender biasness and identity crisis. Public Private Dichotomy is nothing but is a means of discrimination between men and women. This divide is highly gendered as men dominate every aspect of the 'Public Sphere' and women were confined within the four walls of the house. This stereotypical views against the works performed by women is severely criticized by Marxist Feminist thinkers. They are of the opinion that women should have been given the opportunity to equally participate in the public sphere, but in a male dominated society no matter how much the society is developed one; such injustices are continuously been done against women.

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* represents societal conditions of two different times, i.e., the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century respectively. In both these plays the writers depict the female characters in a very similar way. Firstly, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia, the female protagonist has been devoid of a number of rights and opportunities. She had not been given the opportunity to choose her life partner and needs to be dependent on her father's decision. Again, she could not perform the duty of a lawyer as a female human being. She and her maid Nerissa, both have to come out in the disguise of male lawyers. On the other hand, Shakespeare portrays another female character Jessica, who has shown the courage to choose her life partner by going against her father; but she has been shown very negatively for such an act. And this very instance shows us that a female does not have the right to make any decision of her own. Be it the leading character or the supporting ones; everyone have suffered the same subjugation.

The second play that is being analysed in this research work is Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Here also, we see that Nora, the chief protagonist of the play has suffered a lot both in the hands of her father and her husband. After her marriage it is seen that Nora has been treated by her husband as a child, for example, by forbidding her from eating macaroons, something she does anyway despite her promises of total obedience to him. Trovald's pet name for her, which include "skylark", "songbird", "squirrel", and "pet" shows lack of her individual identity. She has sacrificed her own individuality in order to conform to Trovald's expectation.

To conclude this research work, it has been figured out that both the female characters Portia and Nora have been strongly depicted in the play. Both of them have taken courageous steps to secure the lives of their respective husbands; but neither the society nor their respective families have given them the desired recognition. Thus a clear depiction of exploitation against women in one way or the other has been in both the plays by disallowing them to make their own decisions.

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