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Feminist Elements in Henry Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

Dr. Basavaraj Tallur

Asst. Professor

Govt. First Grade College

Dharwad

Abstract

In this paper, I have focused on feminist investigation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. The Feminist movements have fought and continue to campaign for women's civil rights including to hold public office, right to vote, right to work, right to equal wages, equal pay, to own property, right to receive education, to have equal rights within marriage and to have maternity leave. Feminists have also worked to make sure access to legal abortions, the social integration and right to protect women and girls from rape, sexual harassment, and marital violence. Changes in costume and acceptable physical activity have repeatedly has been part of feminist movements.

The important feminists are Simone de Beauvoir, Alice Walker, Margaret Atwood, Sylvia Plath, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Millett, Angela Carter and so on. Basically feminist works covers a broad range of written expression but what they all have in common is a focus on the female equality, her experience and how it has to be changes, expands, and evolves.

Henrik Ibsen is one of the great writers. He focused on women's issues in his works. We can see that most of the works of Ibsen focus on social issues, economic issues and women's issues. In *A Doll's House* also focuses on these types of elements in drama. We can observe that how Nora is facing so many problems due to the patriarchal society. Obsen also focused on women mental condition and what's her inner expectation from life and all other things. The stereotype system is also practising in the society. He avoids that also. He covers mainly women issues in *A Doll's House*. Particularly its focus is on women's status in the society and their behaviour of patriarchal thinking, the lack of true love and affection, value and respect for a wife by a husband and the lack of inequality, injustice and dignity in the treatment of women in the society.

Key words:

Feminism, Henry Ibsen, Nora, Feminist, Women, equality, society, family, Patriarchy.

Full Length paper

Henrik Ibsen was born on 20th March, 1828. He is a Norwegian playwright and theatre director. Ibsen is considered as the **'father of realism'** and he was one of the most significant playwrights of his time. His major works are *A Doll's House*, *Brand*, *Emperor and Galilean*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck*, *When We Dead Awaken*, *Peer Gynt*, *An Enemy of the People* and *The Master Builder*. He is the regularly performed playwright in the theatre after Shakespeare and by the early 20th century, *A Doll's House* became the world's most performed play.

A Doll's House is an important work in the field of feminist criticism. Most of the Feminist critics have observed Ibsen as a revolutionary thinker, social realist and repressed and oppressed women of the nineteenth century Norway and Europe. The play describes woman's right and individual freedom. Nora is like the most women of our modern society having all the natural talents for developing into a successful member of the society as much as her husband. In fact her critical mind, readiness to change, sense of justice, lack of hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness in relation to what is called custom and such other positive qualities would assist her to make more improvement and contribute to the development of her personality her family and her society, if she is to get the opportunities and regard of her silly husband.

A Doll's House a play about women it is indispensable to rethink. When asked about his purpose of the play *A Doll's House* Ibsen declares that the play was not a 'feminist' play, he said that it was a 'humanist' play. What Ibsen meant was that the theme of the play was the need of every individual, whether man or woman, to find out the kind of person he or she really is and to strive to become that person. Ibsen meant that it was not about women only; his proposal was that it is about justice to humanity in general. It means that we look at the problem from a higher phrasing of human anxiety. He saw that an injustice was done to women and he wrote about it. This is to state that the play is about injustice first afterwards about women.

Ibsen rejects the limit of play and meaning to being 'feminist' does not change the emotional and psychological effect of the play on the audiences and the readers. It is a woman's predicament with which the play deals, it is the disenchantment of a wife that is the subject of the play, it is the harsh step taken by a wife with whom the play ends, and it is the woman in the play who wins our highest sympathy. Whatever may have been Ibsen's intentions the effect of the play is to stimulate in us a great deal of sympathy for the cause of women

Norma Helmer is the best design of the illusioned woman who lives in a society where the male oppresses the woman and reduces to a doll. Nora is that doll living in her false doll house which highlights the delicate idea of a constant family living under a patriarchal, stereotype and conventional roof. We argue that Nora and the other female characters described in *A Doll's House* are the best representation of the

second sex or the other, which the French revolutionary writer Simone de Beauvoir discussed in her essay, *The Second Sex*.

In Nora's husband eyes, Nora is nothing but a childish squirrel, a "little skylark", a cute scatterbrain whose feelings are senseless and typical to any other woman's. Starting from her childhood, Nora has been treated as the other by her dad. Then her dad handed her to her husband who treated her like an esteemed custody. This is best described by Nora's self-realization and initiation towards the end of the play:

When I lived at home with Dad, he fed me all his opinions, until they became my opinions. Or if they didn't, I kept quiet about it because I knew he wouldn't have liked it. He used to call me his doll-child, and he played with me the way I used to play with my dolls. And when... Daddy handed me over to you. You arranged everything according to your taste, and I adapted my taste to yours... Now, looking back, I feel as if I've lived a beggar's life—from hand to mouth. (Ibsen, *A Doll's House* 53)

Above dialogue shows that how much Nora has suffered in the patriarchal society. Nora wanted to be free. Whatever she did, she did for her family and husband. But Her husband is not ready to accept that. He abused her because of that she took the revulsnary step in her life.

Nora's well-known monologue in the final scene is thus a compendium of everything that early feminism denounced. In last scene Nora accuses her father and husband of having committed a immense sin against her by treating her like a doll. When she describes herself as a doll spouse who has lived "by doing tricks" she is an example of Margaret Fuller's charge that man "wants no female, but only a young girl to play ball with". When she recognizes that she is unfit to do anything in life and announces her remedy – "I have to try to educate myself" she expresses nineteenth century feminism's universally agreed-upon base for women's emancipation, in telling Torvald, she does not know how to be his wife, she paraphrases Harriet Martineau in "*On Female Education*", which argues the necessity of training women to be "companions to men instead of play things or servants". Finally when Nora realizes that she has duties superior than those of wife and mother, requirements she names as "duties to herself" she is expressing the most basic of feminist principle 'that women, no less than men acquires a moral and logical nature and have not only a right but a duty to develop it, the grand end of their forces should be to unfold their own faculties.

A Doll House is shattered as well as Nora's fantasy. The doll at last recognizes that her role has been nothing but the other. She is conscious that it is she who agreed to the meaning of the "One" and the "Other". It's a moment of profound awakening when Nora realizes that her husband values his reputation and jobs more than he values his love for her. Torvald's bitterness and accusations after knowing about what she had done comes as a blessing in disguise. We hear Torvald telling her,

For all these years, for eight years now, you've been my pride and joy, and now I find you're a hypocrite and a liar and worse, worse than that...a criminal! The whole thing is an abyss of ugliness! You ought to be ashamed. (Ibsen, *A Doll's House* 48)

She makes a decision bravely to dispose her family to get away from the restrictive confines of the patriarchal society where she lives in. She is determined to go out into the world and wanted to know the real experience of real life. She is determined to think out all for herself and be able to make her own decisions.

Nora's leaving of her children can also be interpreted as an act of self forfeit. Even though Nora's great love for her children noticeable by her interaction with them and her great fear of mortifying them she chooses to leave them. Nora really believes that the nanny will be a good mother and that leaving her children is in their best interest.

Nora's understanding of freedom evolves over the journey of the play. Beginning she believes that she will be completely "free" as soon as she has repaid her balance, because she will have the chance to devote herself completely to her domestic responsibilities. After Krogstad blackmails her however she reconsiders her commencement of liberty and questions whether she is happy in Torvald's house subjected to his orders and statutes. In the end of the play Nora looks for a new kind of freedom. She wishes to be pleased of her familial compulsions in order to pursue her own aims, ideas and identity.

A Doll's House is a innovative play that exposes the defects of the 19th century patriarchal society. According to Ibsen "A woman can't be herself in contemporary society. It is a entirely male society, with laws prepared by men and with prosecutors and judges who consider feminine conduct from a male standpoint."

Helmer's rage over Nora's offence collapses the moment the danger of publicity is averted proving that Helmer, like many a moralist, is not so much incensed at Nora's offense as by the terror of being found out. Not so Nora. Finding out is her deliverance. It is then that she understands how much she has been wronged that she is only a plaything, a doll to Nora Helmer. In her disappointment she says

NORA : "You didn't loved me. You only thought it amusing to be in love with me."

HELMER: Why, Nora what a thing to say!

NORA: Yes, it is so, Torvald. While I was at home with father he used to tell me all his opinions and I held the same opinions. If I had others I concealed them, because he would not have liked it. He used to call me his doll child, and participate with me as I played with my dolls. Then I came to live in your house ... I mean I passed from my father's hands into yours. You settled everything according to your feel; and I got the same tastes as you; or I pretended to I don't know which both ways perhaps. When I look back on it now, I seem to have been living here like a beggar, from hand to mouth. I lived by performing tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so. You and father have done me a great wrong. It's your fault that my life has been wasted....

HELMER: It's exasperating! Can you leave your holiest duty in this way?

NORA: What do you call my holiest duty?

HELMER: Do you ask me that? Your duties to your husband and your children.

NORA: I have other duties equally sacred.

HELMER: Impossible! What duties do you mean?

NORA: My duties toward myself.

HELMER: Before everyone else you are a wife and a mother.

NORA: That I no longer believe. I think that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are or at least, I will try to become one. I know that the majority of people agree with you Torvald and that they say so in books. But from now on I can't be pleased with what most people say and what is in books. I must think things out for myself and try to get clear about them.... I had been living at this point these eight years with a strange man, and had borne him three kids Oh! I can't bear to think of it -- I could tear myself to pieces!... I can't spend the night in a strange man's house. (Ibsen. *A Doll's House*58)

In these above dialogues Nora expresses her feelings. Nora informs Torvald in a moment of self realization. This has been the woman's pursuit throughout history. Nora in *A Doll's House* gains victory over all obstacles and finally be aware of her duty towards herself which had always been ignored. Intensely disturbing in its day, *A Doll's House* remains so still because it is the request for woman as a human being neither more or less than man.

Is there anything more humiliating to woman than to live with a stranger and bear him kids? Yet the lie of the wedding institution decrees that she shall continue to do so and the social commencement of duty insists that for the sake of that lie she need be nothing else than a plaything, a doll, a unknown.

In the conclusion we see how Nora took great decision to leave family and a society. Along with her own self she wants to spend time with herself now. Nora's character symbolizes the modern women who can lead her life without man's support. Through this drama Ibsen presents the domestic problems and women's self-respect and what women can do for her family sake. When Nora closes behind her the door of her doll's house, she opens wide the gate of life for woman, and proclaims the revolutionary message that only perfect freedom and communion make a true bond between man and woman, meeting in the open, without lies, without shame, free from the bondage of duty.

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