

Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House : A Postfeminist Perspective**Nagma Nija**

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Abstract

Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House* is a masterpiece. It ushers in the era of modernist plays which look forward to Problem plays of G.B. Shaw and John Galsworthy. Ibsen brought a lasting change to the societal sensibility towards issues of gender roles, the institution of marriage and the aspect of 'choice' of an individual. *A Doll's House* is the play that peeps into the lives of a seemingly happily married couple Torvald Helmer and Nora. It beautifully explores the gender dynamics between the established 'norms' of marriage. Nora is not an ideal 'strong' woman in the sense that G.B.Shaw's *Candida* is. But she has her own reasons to live a life of submissiveness. Though she is subjugated, Nora is not passive in her approach. She wants an organic life for herself where she finds fulfillment in her family. However as things turn out, a dark secret of her past haunts her conjugal life and when it is revealed, Helmer feels agitated and is inclined to leave her. Things take a turn again and Helmer gets pacified and welcomes Nora back in his life. But Nora shuts the door on him at last, giving an impression that she is in control after all. This paper seeks to re-read the play in light of the postfeminist theory which believes that an individual's responses are not committed to an ideology, but vary with the context in which she lives and are the functions of her choice.

Key Words : A Doll's House, Henrik Ibsen, Postfeminism, feminism

Postfeminism is a relatively recent critical theory which has given a fresh perspective on the struggles of women and their responses to unique situations that they face in their everyday life. It is a continuation as well as a critique of feminism.

“Postfeminism (usually written as post-feminism) was coined in the period between the period of achievement of women’s suffrage in the U.S. and the rise of second wave feminism during the 1960s. It denoted the successful outcomes of the struggles by women for the right to vote, hold public office and the choice to occupy many more personal spheres.” [Alice, 1995:7]

The term was coined as a response to the outcomes of the second wave of feminism, but its meaning has undergone a change.

“ Postfeminism as an expression of a stage in the constant evolutionary movement of feminism has gained greater currency in recent years. Once seen, somewhat crudely as anti-feminist, the term is now understood as a useful conceptual frame of reference encompassing the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism. Postfeminism represents, as Yeatman (1994:49) claims, feminism’s ‘coming of age’, its maturity into a confident body of theory and politics, representing, pluralism and difference, and reflecting on its position, in relation to other philosophical and political movements similarly demanding change.” [Brooks, 1]

Postfeminism, as understood from this perspective is about the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference. It is fundamentally about, not depoliticisation of feminism but a political shift in feminism’s conceptual and theoretical agenda. Postfeminism is about a critical engagement with earlier feminist, political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change. Postfeminism expresses its intersection of feminism with postmodernism,

poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks.

Henrik Ibsen's 'A Doll's House' (1879) is one of the major and most critically acclaimed plays of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. This play is about the married life of Nora and Helmer, which is the central theme as it were, of the drama. The events of the play include the act of Nora leaving her husband and her children in order to go out into the world, i.e. out of the 'comforts' of her home in order to gain the first hand experience of life and to find out for herself the discretion of what is right and what is wrong. The play, thus, deals with the issue of woman's liberation. After her marriage, a woman does not lose her identity and individuality. She may idolize her married life. She can choose to be free and refuse to kowtow before unreasonable demands of the man of the house. Henrik Ibsen, as a member of the Scandinavian Club of Rome, had put forward a proposal that the women members of the club should be empowered to vote at its meeting. It is enough to show that Ibsen was sympathetic to the cause of women's rights. The play was written in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when Europe was quite conservative in its views of marriage, womanhood, propriety etc.

Helmer and Nora have had a rather satisfactory conjugal life for nine years. Nora is full of devotion towards her husband. She loves him and is faithful to him. It would not be an exaggeration to say that her life and her world revolve around her husband, Torvald Helmer. When the play opens, Nora is seen leading the life of a pet in her husband's home. Outwardly, it appears that there is a lot of love between the couple. The expressions of love of Helmer like "little skylark" or "little squirrel" may appear innocuous at first, but are problematic. These expressions show love, no doubt, but also show that Nora is regarded as a pet, and equated with a bird or a little animal. The following conversation reflects the normalization of Nora as a pet, an inferior creature and her acceptance of the fact.

"Helmer. When did my squirrel come home?" [Act I]

Torvald Helmer's actions are also that of a caring superior to Nora. For instance, he feels no qualms in taking her by the ear, albeit playfully.

“Helmer. Nora! [Goes up to her and takes her playfully by the ear.] The same little featherhead! Suppose, now, that I borrowed fifty pounds today, and you spent it all in the Christmas week, and then on New Year's Eve a slate fell on my head and killed me, and...” [Act I, Scene I]

There is an attempt on the part of Helmer to dehumanize Nora and place her on a lower pedestal in comparison to his own. His approach towards her is condescending at best. At this point of time, Nora obviously lacks any agency. She is like a trophy for Helmer. He lays down the rules for her to run the household. There is no doubt in anyone's mind as to who the master of the household is. He 'teaches' her the importance of economy in spending money on household stuff and advises her never to borrow and not eat sweets as they would spoil her teeth. Helmer shows his caring attitude for his wife. But possessiveness is seen in his behaviour towards her. It appears that he regards her as his property. In the historical context of the play, things would appear normal and acceptable to the audience who would have grown up imbibing the conservative patriarchal order in their bones.

Helmer had worked as a barrister but due to the lack of certainty of income, his economic condition was not satisfactory. In the initial phase of their married life, Helmer and Nora had to face a lot of troubles due to economic crunch. Helmer had to overwork and he fell ill. Doctors had advised Nora to take him to a warmer climate in southern Europe. Nora, however, does not disclose the fact of dangerous disease to Helmer and tells him that it is her wish to go abroad. She had entreated him to take her abroad in view of her pregnant condition. She had even suggested him to borrow money for the purpose but her suggestion had made Helmer angry as he was opposed to borrowing. Taking Helmer to Italy was the priority for Nora and their poor economic condition was also a reality. She decides to borrow money from the Bank clerk, Krogstad without keeping Helmer in the loop. It is unimaginable for Nora to discuss the matter with her husband because he has a strong opinion against borrowing. He is a man with high self-

respect and considers borrowing as a sign of weakness. Had he known of the borrowing, their conjugal life would have hit a rough patch. Nora and Helmer spend a year in Italy. The couple's stay there had been wonderful and Helmer recovered from the illness. But their stay had cost them a handsome amount of about two hundred and fifty pounds. Nora had borrowed money at an exorbitant rate of interest from Krogstad.

The conflict of the play begins with the exposition that there is a deeper secret that Nora has kept from Helmer. Krogstad had put a condition that the money would be lent only after obtaining a surety for the repayment of loan. Seeing no other option, Nora forged the signature of her father on the promissory note to get the loan. Helmer, obviously, has no idea of the entire episode.

Things turn for the better for Helmer and Nora as the former gets a new job at the Bank and would bring home a decent salary. Helmer would shortly be in a position of power in the Bank in which Krogstad works. Mrs. Linde, an old acquaintance of Nora and now a widow, comes to her to seek a job. She wants a word of recommendation from Nora to Helmer. It says a lot about the power that the society believes, is wielded by Nora. However, when the actual position of Nora is revealed in the household as that of a subordinate, a contrastive study may be made in respect of the society's view of her as an influencer as opposed to her real position as almost a slave of the household. Nora ruminates over her situation if Helmer loses interest in her beauty.

“Nora [meditatively, and with a half smile]. Yes--someday, perhaps, after many years, when I am no longer as nice-looking as I am now. Don't laugh at me! I mean, of course, when Torvald is no longer as devoted to me as he is now; when my dancing and dressing-up and reciting have palled on him; then it may be a good thing to have something in reserve” [Act I]

There is a constant fear in the mind of Nora over the reaction of Helmer to the dubious past incidents that she has kept concealed from him. Clearly, there appears to be a trust deficit between them. But Nora somehow has convinced herself that she can keep her marriage intact by submitting to Helmer. Postfeminists argue for a humanizing a woman in the social context in

which she lives. It is easy to criticize Nora at this point by charging her of meekness or her inability to stand up to Helmer as an equal. This is a stand that the feminists take. But let us understand the psyche of Nora. She wants fulfillment in life with her husband and children and tries to save it by being realistic. This does not absolve Helmer of his guilt of being insensitive and selfish in their conjugal life. But it certainly gives us a perspective into Nora's psyche and helps explain her behaviour. She employs the strategies of flattery, deception and denial to remain in her bubble. She idolizes conjugal life and it is her choice even though it may seem a far cry from the radical feminist thought of dispensing with the institution of marriage altogether.

“Perhaps the most persuasive message for postfeminism is that feminism has pushed women into wanting too much. Postfeminism is offered as an escape from the imposition of being a ‘superwoman’ in order to fulfill a feminist image of success.” [Alice, 1995:17]

Helmer does not have a very high opinion of Krogstad. He believes him to be an immoral man. This is in keeping with Helmer's uprightness evident in the play. He wants to fire Krogstad from his position at the bank and hints at his poor reputation. Krogstad asks Nora to use her influence to ensure that his position remains secure. Here again, Krogstad overrates Nora. He overestimates her ‘agency’. Nora, however, refuses to comply and Krogstad points out that he has in his possession a contract that contains Nora's forgery of her father's signature. Nora is blackmailed by Krogstad. He threatens to reveal her crime and to bring shame and disgrace on the conjugal life of Nora and Helmer if she does not save Krogstad from being fired from his position. Krogstad leaves, and when Helmer returns, Nora tries to convince him not to sack Krogstad, but Torvald doesn't pay attention to her request. He is convinced that Krogstad is not a man of integrity and says that he feels sick in the presence of such people.

Ultimately, Helmer orders the removal of Krogstad. The latter arrives and demands an explanation for his dismissal. He is obviously not a happy man and has now changed the terms of the blackmail: he insists to Nora that not only that he be rehired at the bank but that he be rehired in a higher position. As an act of revenge, he drops a letter detailing Nora's debt and forgery in

Helmer's letterbox. In a perturbed state, Nora details the incident to Mrs. Linde and she advises Nora to distract and delay Helmer's opening the letter as long as possible while she goes to speak with Krogstad. Nora begins to practice the tarantella she will perform at that evening's costume party. This is obviously her strategy to distract Helmer. In her agitated emotional state, she dances wildly and violently. Helmer is surprised by her activities and is displeased with her. Nora manages to make Torvald promise not to open his mail until after she performs at the party. Mrs. Linde comes back to inform that she has written a note for Krogstad but he will be out until the following evening. In course of time, Helmer finds out Krogstad's letter and confronts Nora. He is angry and declares that he is now completely in Krogstad's power; he must yield to Krogstad's demands and keep quiet about the whole affair. He berates Nora, calling her a dishonest and immoral woman and telling her that she is unfit to raise their children. He says that henceforth their marriage will not be a real one but just a matter of appearances.

Meanwhile another letter from Krogstad arrives. Mrs. Linde, on account of her past relationship with Krogstad and her imagined future prospects with him, has prevailed upon Krogstad to return the incriminating bond to Nora. Torvald Helmer is overjoyed that he is saved and immediately burns it along with Krogstad's letters. He takes back his rude words to his wife and tells her that he forgives her. Nora realizes that her husband is not the strong and gallant man she thought he was, and that he truly loves himself more than he does Nora.

Torvald reasons out with her that when a man has forgiven his wife, it makes him love her all the more since it reminds him of her child-like dependence on him. He is willing to see the incident as an aberration or as a mere mistake that she made owing to her foolishness, and he associates it with her feminine traits. But Nora would have none of it. She has realized that her dreams of an organic family life may not materialize as Helmer is selfish and dominating. She slams the door on her husband and moves out to find her true self. It is not certain whether she would return to her husband and family.

“a post-feminist and evolutionary approach questions her actions in the final scene of the play and suggests that, from a contemporary point of view, she might have adopted the more effective survival strategy of negotiating a ‘new deal’ with Helmer, one based on respect, forgiveness,

acceptance, mutual trust and openness. This would allow them both to satisfy the basic needs of survival, family, and kinship, and would also empower them to climb Maslow's Needs Pyramid together, finally achieving the self-actualization that Nora claims she is looking for." [Finch]

But in her defiance, Nora not only answers her husband, she makes him look small. The slamming of the door is also an act of disillusionment with her conjugal life. It reflects a 'choice' that she consciously and conscientiously makes. The play takes a progressive view that the males should treat the females as equal partners in every respect. The playwright shows that if a woman is not allowed to establish her own identity and develop her own individuality, she cannot be really happy. A woman is not a doll and her husband's house is not a doll's house.

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