

Portrayal of a Woman's Conflicts in Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House*: Humanistic Study

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ABSTRACT

Henrik Johan Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright was born on 20 March 1828 in Skein, a small port town on the Southern coast of Norway. The decline of his father's fortunes as a merchant adversely affected young Ibsen and he grew up to be a shy and withdrawn boy. Poverty interrupted his early education and had to seek a job as an apprentice with a pharmacist. However, he never gave up his thirst for knowledge and started preparing to enter the University of Christiania in 1850, meanwhile publishing his first play *Cattilina* (1850), a tragedy in verse. In 1851, he served as theatre poet and stage manager at the National theatre in Bergen. He also served as the Director of the Norwegian theatre at the University of Christiania (1857-62) and had to write a new play every year. In 1858, Ibsen married Susannah Thoresen and the couple had a son, Sigurd. In 1862, a satire *Love's Comedy* was published followed by *The Pretenders* (1863) which was recognized as a national drama. Ibsen began his dramatic pursuits with his semi-dramatic piece *Brand* (1866), portraying the tragedy of a determined idealist pastor. Ibsen also makes an abundant use of symbols and metaphors in his later plays *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosmersholm* (1886), *Lady from the Sea* (1888), and *Hedda Gabbler* (1890). A shift from social concerns to the isolation of the individual marks the last phase of Ibsen's works where he was concerned with depicting the inner man. In 1891 Ibsen returned to Norway and settled in Christiania for a retired life. He died on 23 May 1906.

A Doll's House was written in 1879, after the European Revolutions of 1848, at a time when Europe saw the emergence of a new modern perspective in the literary and dramatic world challenging the existing romantic traditions. Ibsen became the harbinger of a new kind of drama- the realistic drama. His plays attacked the age worn values of the bourgeois society of the times, shocking the audience with their treatment of unconventional taboo themes. He discarded outmoded dramatic techniques such as soliloquies, asides and monologues. Focussing on middle-class life and morality, his plays projected psychological conflicts, the conflict between the individual and the society, between reality and illusion, between true and false idealism. Ibsen remarks that the background of his play is an exclusively masculine society with laws written by men and with prosecutors and judges who regard feminine

conduct from a masculine point of view. Ibsen's play shocked its first audience with its radical insights into the social roles of husband and wife. The play with its theme on individual freedom and emancipation of the self, unveils the gradual growth of Nora, the seemingly complacent wife of Torvald Helmer, from her doll-like existence into a thoughtful human being. Nora's final gesture of slamming the door as she departs from her house leaving her husband and children inside suggests her total rejection of the claustrophobic existence in search of a new identity.

In this paper I am dealing with the social issues of women. The issues such as Treatment of women in the society more specifically the societal hold on them. The societal hold on women that the play displays can be most obviously observed through Torvald and his actions towards Nora. Here comes the family norms and social morals. Norms set standards for how family members dress, talk and act. They also set limits on what is permissible or impermissible behaviour under different circumstances and conditions. More than just rules of etiquette, norms provide family members with a guide for living both within the home and without. Societal norms are more focussed on women and it will not divert from the stereotype. Society always wants women to behave according to the expectations. She is always in a cage where she is not allowed to move according to her interests but according to the owner's interest and need. Women are always meant to sacrifice things in the name of family norms and societal expectation. As the title indicates women in each family is like a doll who plays her role according to the wishes of family and society.

SUMMARY

A Doll's House is written by Henrik Ibsen in Norwegian language in 1879. It has also established a new genre of modern drama. In the past, plays are most about historical romances but this play has built a new genre which talks about the social problems. This three act play takes place in a middle class family and it opens on a Christmas eve. The play traces the awakening of Nora Helmer from her previously unexamined life of domestic, wifely comfort. She was always under the power of her father and husband. The play depicts the progress of Nora's character and inner self to support herself and to stand by her own. She was always treated as a child by her husband and he thinks that she doesn't understand adult concepts of money and work. But Nora was really concerned about her husband, children and their family. She borrowed a large amount of money from a man so that her husband could recuperate from a serious illness. She never told him that and was secretly paying it back in small instalments by saving from her household allowance. Torvald once came to know about this act of Nora and he got infuriated and started cursing Nora. Later he realized the goodness in her and want her back like earlier. But Nora was not ready to go back because she realized the true colour of her husband and she was living like a doll till then. So she decided to get out of this web of social norms and restrictions. Thus she shut the door of the home and went out with her identity. When the behaviour of woman has been analysed through the man's perspective in the play then it can be considered as a feminist play. But it can be observed in the play that the reader has also many other perspectives to analyse the woman's behaviour.

One of them is humanism. Humanism is about the value of human being in the society. It includes the identity and dignity of the person. Identity and dignity are the basic things, needed to be placed at a valued scale in the society. Ibsen discusses these values in the play which are displaced from the society. He also identifies the reasons behind the displacement of these social values. In other words, he talks about those values of humanism, he does not find in the society.

NORA'S CONFLICT

Nora is the central character. She is a typical woman, wife, and mother who always sacrifice herself for the sake of her husband, children and family. Nora is like a doll in the hands of her husband, Torvald. She has no authority in the house. There are many restrictions imposed on her by society. Those restrictions stop her to find her own place in the society. Perhaps she is already at some place but that place is defined by her husband. She is always considered as inferior by her husband. Torvald constantly talks down to his wife, Nora by calling her "My little skylark", "My little squirrel", "My little singing bird", "My little sweet tooth", "My little featherhead", "My poor little Nora". She is always belittled by her husband and always considered as immature and ignorant creature. For Torvald, Nora was merely a concept who is frail, needs guidance, and who he has ownership over. At the beginning of the play, Nora seems completely happy and takes pleasure in the company of her children and friends. She doesn't seem to mind her doll like existence in which she is coddled, pampered and patronized. She was happy for what she have. But towards the end, she realized her position and how she was treated in the family by her husband. Hence she no longer wants to be as a doll in her husband's hands. As a human Nora was denied her identity throughout her life.

ATTITUDE OF TORVALD

Torvald believes that a man's role in marriage is to protect and guide his wife. He clearly enjoys the idea that Nora needs his guidance and he interacts with her like a father. For him his wife was always under him and he believed that she always needs his supervision and guidance to be complete. He showed all his power and superiority on her in everything. He treated his wife like a puppet which always acts according to his wish. His attitude gets changed through out the play. At the beginning he was really in love with his wife and pampered her as if she is a little girl. But later when he came to know that Nora has forged her father's signature to get the money he was really disturbed and called his wife as a deceitful woman.

In Act III, Torvald says that:

‘I shall not allow you to bring up the children; I dare not trust them to you’

This shows the level of hatred that Torvald have upon Nora regarding that fake signature. Torvald was a man who is concerned about his position and status in the society rather than anything. So he believed that Nora's this act will spoil his good image among his friends and

society. Hence he blamed her like anything. But when he came to know that the problem is all over and it didn't cause any trouble in his life he started loving his wife again and now he forgave her and forget everything.

Here we could see the actual colour of Torvald. When a problem arises, he is not at all ready to stand along with his wife to support her and he even blamed her that she is too immature and careless in life. But when all the problems get settle down, he again wants his wife to be back with him like it was earlier.

NORA'S ENLIGHTENMENT

Nora has completely changed when the play enters in to Act III. Her husband's reaction on the forged signature taught her many things and she realized that hitherto she has lived her life for her father, husband, children, family etc but not for herself. Nora decided to come out of the stereotypical wife or mother and she holds up her identity and freedom. In Act III she tells her husband that:

‘Yes, Torvald, I have changed my things now’.

This is a metaphor in which Nora is actually talking about her and she says that she is not that old Nora anymore.

Nora: Alas, Torvald, you are not the man to educate me into being a proper wife for you.

This shows Nora's optimistic view and her decision of breaking all the social norms which she has been following till then. Now she realizes that she has been living her entire life like a doll in the house. Till marriage she obeyed and followed her father and after marriage her husband took that position of overpowering her. Now she decided not to compromise but to live her life for her own. She actually regains her identity and dignity. The last scene of Nora shutting the door symbolically stands for her revolt against husband and by extension a slap in the face of patriarchy, social norms and societal holds on women.

CONCLUSION

Humanism is about the value of human being in the society. Here Nora's human values remains unnoticed till certain time. She spent her entire life adopting the views of others rather than holding on to her own. She has been less of a human and more of a doll, first for her father and then for her husband, Torvald. The Humanistic approach emphasizes the personal worth of an individual. The approach is optimistic and focusses on the noble human capacity to overcome hardship, pain and despair. In the play Nora, at last overcomes her hardships and decides to hold up her own identity rather than adulterating it for other's sake. As a researcher, I observed that *A Doll's House* is accurately a humanist play. Rather than any other things mutual respect and understanding is the most needed thing in a family. The domestic violence should be completely wiped out. Every human being is worth and he

or she should be respected and valued. The last scene of the play indicates the burst of Nora's pain and suffocation which she hid within herself till that time.

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