

**The Return That Never Was...: Portraying the Disjunctures of The Private Space in *A Doll's House Part 2* by Lucas Hnath****Dr. Vineet Maxwell David**

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**Abstract**

*A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen remains a text that seemingly never experienced a closure. A reason why it offers an opportunity for intellectual skepticism is not much of a surprise as it has always been a reason for its compelling nature as a text, one that has over a period of time consciously reaffirmed its profundity as an original classic. Ibsen's play has been instrumental in furthering the nature of (a) dialogue/s that always embodied a stimulating and thought-provoking interaction from the audience and readers' alike. *A Doll's House Part 2* by Lucas Hnath, is another novel attempt by the playwright to bring out the significance of the classic within a renewed scope of scholastic and artistic enquiry. The play depicts the return of the protagonist Nora after fifteen years, only this time the 'doll's house' that she left, has been altered and has seen a shift in the affairs of its inhabitants. Hnath, in his dexterous attempt to call his play *A Doll's House Part 2* is to further the idea of the search for identity within a context where time has altered the life choices of its denizens. It also curiously comes across as a furtherance of the 'Nora story' and the momentousness of the occasion of her leaving the house in a tumultuous exit. Nora's departure was not just a loud bang on the door but a forced destiny that made her move out in the anonymity of a nebulous expanse of an unknown world, uncharted and unfamiliar. The closure of the original classic had its reverberations lurking in the afterthought of a tragic fallout which impaired human bonds and rendered relationships fragile. The paper dwells on the expanse of the idea that the play draws a more complex narrative, trying to find a human response, this time a little more emotive in its transactions. The paper also furthers the idea to really know the characters better as they try to explicate life and its daunting circumstances in the narrative, while also trying to comprehend their struggles within the context of personal and societal negotiations. The paper also brings to the fore the context within which an enlargement of the original classic in its more vital and contemporary relevance could be made possible and to also be appreciative towards the playwright's flair for a profound dramaturgy.

**Keywords:** Dialogue/s, identity, anonymity, emotive, societal negotiations.

*A Doll's House Part 2*, by Lucas Hnath is a contemporary play that has gained significance in imparting a meaningful advancement to the idea of *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen. The pivotal importance of Ibsen's text has been accorded to as an exemplary play which is not only seen as a foundational work of art but also as a progressive idea which led to the flourishing of modernism in theatre. Ibsen's text and its currency towards a wider understanding found ample flourish in locating the immediacy of human existence and its dignity as a sacrosanct idea that gave impetus to a meaningful understanding towards a shift

in human sensibility. Lee A. Jacobus in his book *The Bedford Introduction to Drama* mentions: “Ibsen said that his intention in the play was not primarily to promote the emancipation of women; it was to establish, as Ibsen’s biographer Michael Meyer says, “that the primary duty of anyone was to find out who he or she really was and to become that person”. (Jacobus 635)

*A Doll’s House Part 2* was premiered at South Coast Repertory on 9th April, 2017. The sequel, as it sees the light of day in 21<sup>st</sup> century, is a play that invigorates a keen interest in the unfolding of human affairs and it puts within perspective the idea of theatre as speaking to us in order to bring about a certain transcendence. It also earnestly makes an attempt to revisit a seminal work of performing arts like *A Doll’s House* by Henrik Ibsen in more ways than one. The highlight in the play’s inaugural moment is Nora Helmer’s return to the ‘house’ after fifteen years. The house and its threshold witnessed an abrupt departure that came from a vigorous urge to reclaim one’s dignity. It was the doll’s house rendered dispirited in an abeyance of an uncanny silence, grievous in its hush in the after-years of Nora leaving her house.

*A Doll’s House Part 2* is a play chronicled in the momentousness of time travel as it arduously makes an attempt to go back in time where Ibsen’s text was once placed. Lucas Hnath positions his text in the progressive idea seeking a desired furtherance to augment a universal appeal that Ibsen’s play epitomised and now its relevance gaining currency in the articulation of a contemporary discourse. The interlude of fifteen years is where the sequel positions its timeline, as it tries to look into the olden bronzed hours of a certain historicity namely towards the close of nineteenth century Europe and yet seems to echo through its vitality as a thriving foundational text/work of art that never seems to have had a closure.

In an interesting study of the origination of Ibsen’s women characters and more importantly the birthing of the character of Nora, the article by Katherine Hanson in the chapter “Ibsen’s Women Characters and Their Feminist Contemporaries” mentions how Henrik Ibsen was greatly inspired by the “pioneers of the feminist movement in his Native Norway, Camilla Collett and Aasta Hansteen” (qtd. in Abraham 72). As a fervent supporter of women’s rights, Ibsen was trying to portray the influence of the new wave in human sensibility where a greater accommodation needed to be placed in the realm of women’s equality and dignity. Katherine Hanson mentions quite clearly that Nora’s character championed the cause of a shift in sensibility unlike any other character of the times. She mentions: “Opponents of the feminist movement understood what a powerful influence this play could have among the people, and they denounced the playwright and the woman he had created—Nora was, I think, the first of Ibsen’s female characters who was debated and discussed by the public as if she were flesh and blood, a member of the society, instead of a fictional character. (qtd. in Abraham 76)

The play’s thematic significance finds consequence in its capacity to relook into the lives of its characters as individuals seeking to negotiate and overcome the direness of their vulnerability as lone-beings trying to make sense of it all. It is noteworthy that the playwright’s insight into providing an empathetic assessment of the essentialness of its characters as also people speaking through the voice of their conviction is also a reason why the division of the play is made through using the characters’ names and not acts and scenes.

The return of Nora to her ‘doll’s house’ is no ordinary homecoming. It is also an attempt to stir the stillness of time that has hitherto been under the sway of ruffled emotions of individuals who seem to have lost a bit of themselves in all these years. It is a homecoming that one feels could never have been easy and comes across as an emotional conflict which is stiffened in the anguish of a painful disjuncture. The play seemingly hints at the use of analepsis where, interestingly Lucas Hnath seems to pick up the reins of the story where Ibsen’s play came to an end. However, the play contests the idea of a closure. The return of Nora is also a retrieval of her past along a certain emotional refrain played out in her cautious entrée where she meets Anne Marie, her old house maid, her daughter Emmy, now in her youth and most importantly her husband, Torvald Helmer.

The first section entitled ‘Nora’ is where the character Nora recounts this homecoming as not only stepping into her previous habitation but to also come back with a purpose, to set few things right in her life. The playwright’s introduction to Nora is much in the strain like ‘Mrs. Linde’ in the original classic. Hnath’s attempt as a playwright to effectively throw light on this aspect of Nora’s return is to assess her coming back not in a state of vengeful ire, but to provide his audience another opportunity to return to the theatre of the ‘domestic space’; the ‘house’. The attempt is towards edifying the context of the domestic sphere as a site of conflict and still burdened by the circumstantial consequentiality of the past, now seeking a reality check in the present. This time it is not only Nora but Anne Marie, Torvald, Emmy and the (two sons in absentia) as stakeholders. The play offers an enlarged perspective of characters trying to unfold their own life scripts, as they contemplate this homecoming through the lens of their own experiential conviction. Nora in her meeting with Anne Marie in the initial part of the play mentions:

Nora. I’ll tell you what: I’m not the same person

Who left through that door.

I’m a very different person (Hnath 12)

This declaration by Nora is a painful reminder of her past but the play is also a way to bring within its ken the ruptured lives of all the others who were left behind. The playwright through his sequel does not only puts the action in the present, but it advances upon the idea of the past lives of the characters and portrays them in *A Doll’s House Part 2* in very different emotional states of being. Nora’s departure was triggered due to her inability to bear the weight of a relationship which had turned sour due to its non-committal nature and also her futile quest to seek fullness of a companionship in an erstwhile ruptured conjugal relationship with Torvald. The unceremonious closure in the form of her departure was also a way to say no to patriarchal control, and to also firmly stand against the idea of being reduced to a “doll”. The sequel categorically brings the Nora story as central to a dramatic representation because the story of Nora is still iconically representational. To think of Nora as a character/individual subsumed under the hold of patriarchy was a clarion call that Ibsen made and Hnath only takes this idea forward. The intellectual tangent that the sequel plays out is to

broaden the scope of the narrative, a story that now serves as a rightful template to force a more advantageous academic argument. Gerda Lerner in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* mentions:

“The contradiction between women’s centrality and active role in creating society and their marginality in the meaning-giving process of interpretation and explanation has been a dynamic force, causing women to struggle against their condition. When, in that process of struggle, at certain historic moments, the contradictions in their relationship to society and to historical process are brought into the consciousness of women, they are then correctly perceived and named as deprivations that women share as a group. This coming-into-consciousness of women becomes the dialectal force moving them into action to change their condition and to enter a new relationship to male-dominated society”. (Lerner 5)

Hnath also keeps the iconography of the house as an ‘all-seeing category’ from where Nora had once escaped. The house also represented a space upholding a moral ground which flowed through her husband’s sanctions. It represented a space of emotional trauma and personal loss, often coming across as a site of memory which she visits again. The symbolic metaphor of the house in the sequel is restituted as a space that is profoundly understood in the wake of newer negotiations to be made by the couple and other members. It symbolically portrays the idea of being a liminal space with relation to the Helmers. Nora’s visitation is largely perceived as a ‘site’ of embittered emotions, where lives were torn asunder and were forever altered. Monika Fludernik mentions in the book *Metaphors of Confinement* as to how the ‘domestic space’ is mentioned in the understanding of it being an “enclosure”. She cites the idea given by Gaston Bachelard in the work, “The Politics of Space” where he talks about the domestic space as a “shelter”. He says “the house is a space of intimacy” (Fludernik 232). This space is a space of comfort. However, it can alter itself in the process of one’s understanding. “John R. Stilgoe notes in his introduction, the house, “[a]lways container, sometimes contained”, for Bachelard “serves [...] as the portal to metaphors of imagination” (viii). Interior space “vibrat[es] at the edges of imagination, exploring the recesses of the psyche, the hallways of the mind (vii)”.

However, Fludernik is mentioning it in the larger context of the idea of imprisonment as a place of seclusion and enlarging this idea with that of a house. She puts the “house” under the category of an “enclosure” wherein she mentions “Container and contained—this is the constitutive ambivalence of enclosure” (Fludernik 232). Portraying the significance of the spatiality and the quintessential reference to the house is also played out in its nominative potency. It is indeed memorialised as the ‘Doll’s House’, a house that once evoked cherished memories of mirth and homeliness of a family, though living in a semblance of jollity and mirth, only to be rendered emotionally vacant in the aftermath of anguish and personal trauma. The symbolic ideation of the house as a major trope in the play serves to portray it as an architectural domain and a dwelling. The house with its precincts is also portrayed as a space where a long silent wait is seen tenanted in the gloom of advancing years.

The homecoming of Nora is also an assertion for her to proclaim her life in these fifteen years of departure and to have taken the leap of faith into an unknown chapter of her life. Nora returns with her claims, she has become a successful writer who writes “Books about women” (Hnath 18). Her coming of age as a writer is symbolic. She has begun to script life experiences (apparently putting herself in her experiential writings), books for women who found devalued in a conjugal relationship.

Anne Marie. marriage makes a lot of people very happy, very—

Nora.           that’s debatable. I’d argue that most people would be happier, more  
                    fulfilled without it (Hnath 21)

It is also a reason why the focus on human relationships in this play is of pivotal importance. The relational nuances which the play brings to focus are more of a dialogue seeking an understanding amidst the incoherence of human relationships caught in the wrangles of an unceasing tedium.

The play also tries to focus on the lives of its lesser-known characters like Anne Marie and Emmy who also make their voices heard in a renewed understanding of life’s disposition. Nora’s return is also based upon the fact that she comes seeking Torvald’s consent regarding their divorce which he never filed all these fifteen years and because of that Nora has been living a life of not having this knowledge.

Nora. I’ve behaved as an unmarried woman,  
          I have conducted business that married women are  
          not allowed to conduct without the consent of their husbands,  
          signed contracts that are now void,  
          I could be prosecuted and put in prison  
          and believe me there are people who would have me prosecuted,  
          who would have me dragged through the mud (Hnath 43)

The play dwells on the insecurities of its characters and also portray the precariousness of their situation. It is not only Nora who faces the agony of her trials and tribulations but also Torvald who had to wade through an emotional crisis of his own.

Torvald. You left,  
          You left me.  
          You walked out this door

and you left me  
 and you left the kids  
 and when I think back on what happened  
 I think to myself that I have one  
 big  
 regret:  
 I wish I left you. (Hnath 44-45)

The play is a human story rendered in the criticality of an impending confrontation, a confrontation that does not seem like that it has progressed towards any resolution. It is also an attempt to look back and to be in the present, a kind of limbo from where the desire to reason one's actions has left many wanting, like wading through the quagmire of unresolved emotions and coming to terms with one's incapacities and where its futility remains. Hnath also lays threadbare the problems of marriage in the play. The section entitled 'Torvald' is a turning point in the play where the characters speak their mind. The hollowness and banality of doublespeak in any relationship is seriously contested. Torvald and Nora come face to face in what seems like a difficult argument about their past and how it has affected their present lives.

Interestingly, Lucas Hnath also brings a different element in the play where Nora confronts Emmy, her daughter who had to go through the experience of a broken family. It is Emmy who informs Nora about the goodness of marriage, whereby finding love as a means of sustenance is not an uncherished idea after all. Emmy's opinion is an alternative clarion. She believes in the institution of marriage and to feel flourished in the company of someone she loves and contests the views given by Nora.

Emmy. I actually think it's good to be stuck in a marriage.

It's the fact that we're bound together, that it's difficult to leave,  
 that actually makes people stick around and try—  
 I think—because if things keep on going  
 the way you say they should,  
 then—what will that look like?—  
 a future where everyone is leaving each other— (Hnath 100)

Hnath in his artistic display of a looming tragic consequence in the 'house' gives progression to the lives of these individuals like a montage of lives put within the scope of



enquiry. He furthers the dramatic element by making subtle use of the conflict in the play by putting characters in a state of conversation making it a more experiential portrayal of its characters and in a more pronounced and articulated manner.

In the last section, which leads to the turn of events in the play to its conclusion, is quite remarkable. The playwright allows the last section as a confrontational dialogue between Nora and Torvald. This is quite reminiscent of the original play where the closure of the play witnessed an argument between a husband and wife and their agonising parting. As the play draws to a close we realise that Nora's position as a writer has made her write books which embodies her uniqueness in the experiential flair of her personal writings. The play holds Nora as an accomplished writer who shares her experiences through her candidness and more importantly pressed by the urge to be heard. The play offers multiple view points of the characters but Nora's tragic consequence is a point of no return. The immediacy with which the playwright questions the idea of patriarchy and Nora's refusal to passively submit to it, makes the play quite noteworthy. However, the play also puts into perspective the voices of its other characters, as if not in the mode of an utterance to be listened to but as a more humane understanding of people's lives that are somehow caught in an endless salvo of misunderstood opinions waiting to be heard.

Nora's claims as a woman who defied the oppressions of a meaningless existence is symbolic as she returns from the state of anonymity of stepping out of that threshold once and yet readies herself to go back again to a world that awaits discovery. The last section is more placated in its dialogue exchanges between characters. Nora and Torvald acknowledge that not everything between them was right and so they had to pay for the consequences. The play's closure, if it is viewed in that light, is another onward journey of its characters somewhat altered in the experience of an introspective knowledge of perhaps knowing themselves and each other slightly better.

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