

Emancipation of the Woman: A Study of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

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Literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. Mathew Arnold defines literature as a criticism of life. It means that literature is an interpretation of life. As per Johnson's definition, literature is a mirror of life as life is being reflected through literature. The success of literary art is determined not only by the awards given to it but also the understandability to the common people and its impact on the people.

Henrik Johan Ibsen projects the woman's place in the society, one of the burning topics of the day, in his play *A Doll's House*. In this choice of theme, he was more influenced by his own convictions than the growing movement for the emancipation of woman. He is regarded as the father of the modern drama and the prophet of new morality. He stands supreme among the moderns. He is often considered as the greatest dramatist next to Shakespeare.

He is a social realist with a sense of commitment. In all his social plays, he focuses on the contemporary ailments of the society, which cry for remedies. Ibsen, for the first time, turned the social drama into "The drama of ideas". In his plays, he questioned the settled ideas, beliefs, and opinions which governed the life of his society and its members. Shaw substantiates it as the drama arises through a conflict of unsettled ideals rather than through vulgar attachments, capacities, generosities, resentments, ambitions, misunderstanding, oddities and so forth as to which no moral question is raised.

Ibsen blazed a new trail in the field of modern drama that was admired by great personalities such as Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy, Henry James, J.M.Barrie, Gilbert Murray and H.H.Asquith. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is a masterpiece of compact dramatic structure. It has a minimum of dramatic character and maintains a dramatic unity of place, time and action. In the play, he uses some technical factors which contribute to the apparent realism of his play. The detailed stage directions, employment of everyday prose and elimination of soliloquies and 'asides' are also included. His stress on the visual concreteness of his settings and characters help him greatly in making his plays look life – like.

The characters are drawn from real middle-class set up. The problem posed in his play is the problem of subservient women in that period. In pre-emancipation days, when women were considered to be subservient to man and wives merely existing through their husband's will, Ibsen weaves his characters with flesh and blood to make them come out with the pressing social conventions and customs which leads to the freedom of the individuals in society. He gives more importance to the delineation of his characters than his plot and he enables his viewers to get a full and perfect picture of his characters.

A Doll's House is a naturalistic or realistic play. It is an anti-romantic play both in its theme and setting. It deals with the problem of man – woman relationship through the mirror of marriage. The play deals with variety of themes. The Chief among them is “the liberation of the individual from the shackles and restraints of custom and convention”

Conscience and moral laws are of two kinds, one for men and another is quite different for women. They do not understand each other; but in practical life, woman is judged by masculine law, as if she was not a woman but a man. A woman can not be herself in modern society. It is an exclusive male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint. A mother in modern society has undergone a lot of suffering inflicted by masculine community. Finally, she expires after she has done her duty by propagating the race.

The play *A Doll's House* bears a close resemblance to a typical intrigue play. Nora, the heroine is guilty of committing forgery. This act of indiscretion makes the villain, Krogstad, blackmail her. She has committed this incriminating deed in order to save the life of her husband, Torvald Helmer. But Helmer, instead of appreciating the sacrifice of his wife, indicts her as a liar and criminal, unfit to rear their children any longer. However, she is ultimately saved by the intervention of her old friend (of her school days), Mrs. Christine Linde, who manages to bring about a change in the heart of Krogstad. Helmer is willing to forgive Nora for her rash act. Krogstad frees Nora from exposure and shame. But, Nora does not stay with her husband. She leaves her home and children to learn the way of the world and experience the brave new world.

Nora readily adjusts the traditional role of a puppet wife and a doll – mother for the sake of gaining self-liberation, individuality and independence. The play tries to probe the true base of the man–woman relationship in its most intimate forms of marriage. Nora is perfectly aware of outsider's opinion about her. They opine that she is a wasteful, silly young woman without character. She becomes very much annoyed, when she is told by her friend Mrs. Christine Linde that she knows “so little about the troubles and hardships of life”. She is proud of her act in borrowing money to save her husband's life without his knowledge. She understands, however, that if Helmer knew of her independent act, it would affect their healthy marital relationship. She knows her husband's whims and fancies thoroughly. She helps to keep his proud image of himself as the head of the family. She knows that he loves her for being pretty amusing.

Nora's ability to get on with her husband well does not come to her aid in her dealings with other. When Krogstad threatens her, Nora tries her various tricks without any avail. She can not understand that the world outside her house is often ruthless and that it does not submit to tears airs of superiority, or romantic notions of duty. Having a very high opinion of her motives, Nora can not believe that she has done wrong in forging her father's signature to obtain money or that the law will punish her, or that Krogstad would do anything to disrupt her happy and comfortable family life.

All actions of Nora are governed by her relationship with her husband. At first, she does not tell him the truth about her debt to Krogstad, because she is afraid that it will destroy his love for her. Later when the crisis strikes her, she will not tell him the truth because she imagines that he will take the guilt of the forgery to save her. Now, Nora becomes obsessed with ways to save him. She tries to borrow money from Dr. Rank by a

slight exercise of her feminine charms over him. When it fails, she thinks of committing suicide.

Ibsen in his play *A Doll's House* highlights the day-to-day contemporary reality of a middle class family. Though the play projects the male chauvinistic society, it also deals with various problems. A doll with a human figure is normally found in the hands of children, who make the doll act according to their wish. Similarly, Nora is a doll in the hands of three persons, namely Torvald Helmer, Krogstad and her father. Nora is judged from the eyes of men. To them, she has committed forgery and is a cheat but it is not so. She has done everything only for the betterment of her family. Not even a single room is given for her wish or her passion or her emotion; rather she is treated as a puppet, whose acts are controlled by their masters.

Right from the beginning of the play, we can witness male chauvinism and the pathetic figure of Nora who is scapegoat for male chauvinism. She is being treated as a doll throughout. Torvald Helmer wishes that Nora should act according to his wish. Nora is protected, petted, dressed up, given pocket money but she is not allowed to be herself. Though Torvald Helmer is a lawyer by profession, he is the representative of male chauvinism who thinks that his orders has to be carried by her wife, as he is the head of the family. It is he, who holds the key to the letter box in his house. It is Torvald Helmer, who has full control over his wife in every aspect. She plays the doll with her husband just to please him.

Eight years elapsed, since Nora, the wife of Torvald Helmer, got married and had 3 issues. She is an enigmatic character, for she wears a mask. She has borrowed money and enslaved herself in order to save her husband Torvald's life after a physical break down. For seven long years, she has borne the cross in silence. She is sustained by a lack of self awareness and by a false romantic image of her husband.

When Helmer received the second letter, which was written to Nora, he feels happy, knowing that Krogstad has sent her IOU back and he regrets and apologies for what he has done. Helmer forgives Nora but Nora is not able to forgive Helmer. She tells Helmer that three days were a battle of life and death to her. Helmer is happy saying that "It's all over! It's all over! But Nora tells her that she does not seem to realize that the worst is over. Helmer knows whatever she had done is out of love for him. But, he had failed in rescuing her from danger. He had forsaken her. So, Nora decided to emancipate herself. In spite of Helmer's apologies, Nora slammed the door against her husband. George Bernard Shaw says, "The slam of the door behind her is more momentous than the cannon of Waterloo or Sedan". Nora takes with her only the things which belong to her. She bids good bye to her husband and goes out of home for self-edification.

In the marvelous design of the action, Ibsen shows Nora painfully acquiring those attributes, in effect recapitulating the development of the race as she moves from, metaphorically; the role of a little animal, a lark, a squirrel, to a new – born human self with some thing of the tragic sense of life. In this play *A Doll's House*, the protagonist, Nora hides her true feeling so as to please her father and her husband. There is a conflict between what she pretends to be and what she really is. Her spouse, Torvald Helmer, was just a father substitute. She is not happy with him. Torvald promises to treat her as she would wish him to do. She refuses to stay. He reminds her of her duty as a wife to him and as mother to her children. Ibsen has chosen a very apt title for his play. The title, *A Doll's House*, also highlights the principal theme of marriage and subservient role of

women in society. It symbolically suggests that true marriage is not based on illusions and phantasies. It does not work like the mechanical manipulation of the dolls. True marriage will depend upon the perfect understanding between the couple by each respecting the individuality of the other. Emancipation of Nora is a trumpet call for the women of the day to raise banner of revolt to press for their lost rights.

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