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The Concept of Feminism in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the role of women and their right in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). Ibsen, one of the world's greatest dramatists, is considered as the father of modern drama, and as one of the great supporters of women. He never calls himself a feminist, and he is more a humanist. There are indeed plenty of feminist tendencies in his plays. Based on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "the Other," this paper will show the untrue system of marriage, stressing on individuality of women and fighting for their freedom, in addition protesting to all restrictions in society. Under the impact of Ibsen's ideology, individuality and humanity are the most important social issues which are developed in his works. All social instructions and conventions are the enemy of every individual because they restrict the characters' personal identity and their freedom. In particular, Ibsen expands this outlook on the women's position whose individuality and freedom are taken by masculine society. Nora, as a woman, a wife, or a mother, behaves like a doll. She is under the control of the invisible hands and the pressures of patriarchal society. Ibsen protests against the position of women in a masculine society which is unfair and under the hegemony of male-dominated powers.

Keywords: Freedom, Humanity, Identity, Individuality, Masculine Society, Patriarchal Society.

Introduction

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) has certainly achieved a unique and peculiar place among the most significant modern dramatists. He is famous not only for his plays and poems but also for his deep philosophical and revolutionary ideas, which had an undeniable impact on the development of literature in general and drama in particular throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He is considered as the father of modern drama and the first dramatist who wrote various tragedies about ordinary people. Ibsen developed the problem plays or drama of ideas whose main emphasis is on the presentation of a drama. George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, remarks that, "[t]he Norwegian's significance lay in his having introduced social-political discussion into the drama through the agency of a villain-idealist and unwomanly woman" (77).

The problem of Ibsen's social drama is consistent through all his works. In *A Doll's House* (1879, DH), he especially probed the social problem of the passively assigned to women in a male-oriented society. After considering the plight of Nora Helmer, he then investigated what would have happen if she had remained at home. In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen is concerned with the problem of women's position in society. The theme that is more interesting to him in this play is the duties towards oneself and achieving the individuality and individual rights in the society. Indeed, in a patriarchal society which is controlled by men's rules, this is woman, who should try to get her rights: "What duties do you mean? Nora: my duties towards myself" (DHIII, 68).

A Doll's House is a tragedy in which Nora leaves her house by slamming of a door to the world of new possibilities. She is going off to know her own responsibilities towards herself. This kind of self-realization, which usually leads to a new beginning, is one of Ibsen's main ideologies posed in his play. Nora opens her eyes and observes that her individuality and freedom have been taken in living with Torvald Helmer. Nora is a woman who will not go on living her life on illusions and with a strange man anymore. Helmer has lived according to the reasons and rationality of a man, his point of view is arranged based on power and order. For such a systematized, disciplinary man, reputation is more important than sacrificing himself for the family life. Now he sees that only the hope of a miracle is left since reason no longer accomplishes anything. Nora's winning of her individual freedom is for self-development whereby she is to become a person in her own right and also in the sight of others. She has discovered painfully that she has treated as a nullity and that this must be changed.

Parenthood has been a kind of adulthood in literature for many years. As the drama's title announces and as Nora herself confirms in the last act, marriage and motherhood have been for her a kind of existence in a doll's house in which she has played with her children, with Helmer and even with her father before her marriage. In order to reach the real maturity, she must leave this life behind. Hence, after passing a long bitter experience, she comes to the conclusion that it is worthwhile to leave her family to achieve her independence and individuality.

In *A Doll's House*, the readers deal with the rigid morality of Helmer, and the desire woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day of his wife is to sacrifice herself thoroughly for his sake. In such a society run by masculine laws with no emotions, Nora stops her flow of feeling and says "we have never sat down in earnest together to try and get at the bottom of anything" (DHIII, 66). This assertion is one of the key sentences in the Feminist approach, since it expresses the moment of revelation when Nora notices that she has been treated as a second hand creature and her indisputable

rights have been ignored. Also Nora's declaration is the climax of the play, which can be considered as an exordium of new technique and subject in the modern drama. Although as in the classical genre, the rising action reaches its highest point, based on a magnificent and lofty subject, in *A Doll's House* it is about a serious discussion between a husband and a wife which is one of the basic elements of modern drama.

Due to her reasons she cannot stay in her doll's house any longer. No more emotion and sacrifice work here. She refuses to submit to her husband anymore and wants to face the world on her own. According to the male-dominated society, Nora has done an unthinkable action as a middle-class woman in ordinary circumstances. But to the female one, she wants to prove herself as an independent human being and is continuing to struggle for the self-realization of her true self. Up to that time few women had profited from individualism. Before Nora, no woman in fiction had ever taken such a courageous action.

Materials and Methods

Feminist theory aims to understand the nature of inequality of women and focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality. It campaigns on issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity leave, equal pay, sexual harassment, discrimination and sexual violence. Themes explored in feminism include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression and patriarchy. The basis of feminist ideology is that rights, privileges, status and obligations should not be determined by gender. Modern feminist theory has been extensively criticized as being predominantly, but not exclusively, associated with western middle-class academia. Feminist activism, however, is a grass roots movement which crosses class and race boundaries. It is culturally specific and addresses the issues relevant to the women of that society. Some issues such as rape, incest, mothering, are universal themes.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) was a French writer, intellectual, feminist and social theorist who is best known for her treatise *The Second Sex* (1949), a detailed analysis of women's oppression and a foundational tract of contemporary feminism. It deals with the treatment of women throughout history and is often regarded as a major work of feminist philosophy. It illustrates de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "the Other." "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301). It asserts that the experience of woman has been neglected by conventional society. As de Beauvoir writes in her *The Second Sex*, "[t]wo separate beings, in different circumstances, face to face in freedom and seeking justification of their existence through one another, will always live an adventure full of risk and promise" (248).

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, declares that “[o]ur societies are patriarchal and a woman must break the bonds in order to be herself as a human being” (125). Meanwhile, in 1878, in notes made for *A Doll’s House* Ibsen declares that “[a] woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine, from a masculine point of view” (Meyer, 1971b:9).

Results and Discussion

Many years before the appearance of the feminist movement led by Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva and others, Ibsen protested against the position of women, their rights and their being neglected in society. In the early decades of the twentieth century Virginia Woolf, in her work *A Room of One’s Own*, asserts that “Men have treated women as inferiors for many years. It is the men who define everything in the society” (28). In the Norwegian Women’s Rights League on 26 May 1898, Ibsen made the infamous statement: “I have been more poet and less social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe [...] I am not even quite clear as to just what this women’s rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of mankind in general [...] my task has been the description of humanity.” (Innes, 26)

It seems unproductive to regard the socialist cause, the women’s cause, and the human cause as mutually exclusive for Ibsen. His concern with the state of the human soul cuts across class and gender lines. Ibsen himself often linked the women’s cause in need of reform, arguing for example that all (including women) should form a strong progressive party to fight for the improvement of women’s position and of education. Ibsen is observed as a humanist, he calls himself a humanist not a feminist and rejects any dependence to special group or class or gender.

His ultimate desire is truth and freedom. He stresses a new beginning and reform and self-realization. Like other socialists, if he is called so, he wants a change and reform, including woman’s position too. He desires to fight for the improvement of women’s position and of their education. An untrue system of marriage, heredity, platonic love, motherhood and women’s position in the family and society are the repeating themes in Ibsen’s plays.

As discussed before, the most favorable of his themes are stress on individuality, self-realization, freedom and liberation. Looking at these outstanding themes and protesting against their absence in his restricted society, Ibsen explicitly or implicitly depicts woman’s position as a deprived and dependent creature whose humanity and individuality is taken from her. Ibsen never expresses his opinions in the play through his

characters. He just “gives the reader the impression of experiencing a piece of reality” (Wellek, 6). Through his accurate observation the other sympathetic themes such as untrue system of marriage, the conflict between men and women, as lords and slaves, the absence of love, and so on, are posed. Ibsen strongly believes that women have an equal right with men for development as individuals and human beings.

For instance, Torvald, in *A Doll’s House*, believes in patriarchal society, even he strives to keep Nora in this system, but Nora recognizes herself and gains self-knowledge and rebels against such patriarchy. It means that she has personal and subjective understanding of social reality. In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Shaw believes: “Ibsen gives us not only ourselves, but ourselves in our own situation [...]. They are capable both of hurting us cruelty and of filling us with excited hopes of escape from idealistic tyrannies, and with visions of intense life in the future.” (153)

The important point is that the things that happen to the play’s characters are things that are common to all the people. It is because these events are realities which surround all people who are familiar with them in their everyday life. Ibsen’s plays have great influence on others. One of the most significant differences between Ibsen and his other contemporary playwrights is that the situation he used in his plays is common and makes others awaken and experience a change in their inner world.

A Doll’s House is a spotlight on the society when people are under the pressure of public opinion about masculine society. This play discusses social problems in general, and individuals’ in particular, women are considered as victims and society as a victimizer. Nora, as a new woman, experiences victory, her journey to self-realization happened as a miracle, unexpected, uncertain, but on time. She is the protagonist of this play who lives in decorative surroundings as a doll, and finds out that she is nothing but a precious instrument in her husband’s hands. This knowledge helps her to strive in order to find her lost or neglected values in a conventional society. Therefore she leaves her home and children in opposition to the conventional and majority’s rule, society’s oppressive authority and conventions.

At first glance, Nora lives in a home that seems peaceful. Although apparently Helmer, her husband loves her and Nora is everything for him, it reveals that Helmer is just a proud man who only thinks about his social situation and Nora’s personality has no meaning for him. Nora’s forging to save his life is an illegal action, but she does it, for, she loves him. She supposes that if one day this secret is revealed, Helmer will protect her, but when she sees that it is just a dream, an illusion and she is only like a pet animal in Helmer’s hands, she decides to leave her home and children in a dark night and puts herself in the outside society, inviting insult, destitution and loneliness.

The play deals with the issue of the position of woman in marriage and in the society. In Ibsen's time the wife is more a servant than a helper. She only states indirect suggestions about home policies and decisions. Her husband is the leader of the family and she is obliged to follow him; hence, she is just like an attractive instrument in her husband's hands to be loved and cherished but nothing more. She does not share in any family responsibilities or troubles. As Ibsen himself, in *Notes for Modern Tragedy* (1878), insists "a woman cannot be herself in modern society. It is an exclusively male society" (Meyer, 1971b). In this society, a wife, or a woman in general, has no idea about what is right or wrong. There is a dilemma in this kind of society, natural feelings on the one hand, and belief in authority on the other hand lead her to distraction.

In such a system of society, the frivolity, romanticizing, and occasional lying that characterize Nora are not so strange because social conventions do not allow her to have a truly, deep and serious share in her personal life. The wife must rely on either escapist dreams or petty subterfuges to adjust to her situation; the dream of Helmar's protection against Krogstad's accusation. At first glance, Nora is portrayed as a macaroon-eating, sweet-toothed creative. She seems frivolous but when she reveals that she forged money that took them to Italy for a year to save her husband's life, she shows us that she is made of much stronger stuff. Nora's speech about her last eight years to Christine, unfold the complexity of her character:

Mrs. Linde. How kind you are, Nora, to be so anxious to help me! It is doubly kind in you, for you know so little of the burdens and troubles of life.

Nora. I—? I know so little of them?

Mrs. Linde (smiling). My dear! Small household cares and that sort of thing!—You are a child, Nora.

Nora (tosses her head and crosses the stage). You ought not to be so superior.

Mrs. Linde. No?

Nora. You are just like the others. They all think that I am incapable of anything really serious—

Mrs. Linde. Come, come—

Nora.—That I have gone through nothing in this world of cares.

Mrs. Linde. But, my dear Nora, you have just told me all your troubles.

Nora. Pooh!—those were trifles. (Lowering her voice.) I have not told you the important thing.

Mrs. Linde. The important thing? What do you mean?

Nora. You look down upon me... I too have something to be proud and glad of. It was I who saved Torvald's life... (DHI.10)

But in reality, she is a resourceful little schemer. A more careful study shows that two faces of Nora are really one, but a very complicated personality. The key to the understanding of Nora is her obsessive lying. She lies about the macaroons to Torvald, “you know I could never act against your wishes,” (DHI.9) and later to Dr. Rank, “yes, well, these are some Christine gave me” (DHI.16). She tells her husband that Christine came especially to see him, “And imagine, now she’s traveled all this way to talk to you” (DHI.17). Her lies are small lies, but they are indicative of the great truth that Nora must constantly lie. Her habit of lying is a partly subconscious way of fighting back against repressive environment. Her chief compensation for this environment, however, is her secret, a source of continual joy and comfort to her.

Thus Nora is living a lie; she appears to her husband as a rather flighty, irresponsible yet thoroughly loveable little creature, while all the time she has been trying to pay off the large debt she contracted when she saved Torvald’s life by getting them all much needed vacation in Italy. From a modern perspective, Nora’s action seems daring and imaginative rather than merely illegal and surreptitious. Torvald Helmer’s moralistic position is to us essentially stifling. He condemns Nora’s father for a similar failure to secure proper signature, “All your father’s recklessness and instability he has handed on to you, no religion, no morals no sense of duty” (DHIII.62). He condemns Nora just as he condemns Nils Krogstad for doing the same thing. He, in fact, condemns people for their bad deeds and crimes without considering their circumstances or motives “I’m not so heartless as to condemn a man for an isolated action ... Men often succeed in re-establishing themselves if they admit their crime and take their punishment” (DHII. 42). In fact, by these sentences, he reverses his first belief.

The atmosphere of Helmer’s household is oppressive. Everything is set up to amuse him, and he lacks any awareness that other people might be his equal. Early in the play Ibsen establishes Nora’s forging; she explains that in order to pay back her loan she had to work for a copy house, and although she resents her labor, she observes that it makes her feel wonderful, the way a man must feel, “oh, we’ve been in no position for me to waste money. We’ve both had to work ... I too have done something to be proud and happy about” (DHI.10).

Ibsen asserts that his intention in the play is not primarily to promote the emancipation of women; it is 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” (1971a: 456). In this play, immediately after the moment of confrontation with reality, Nora realizes herself and her situation, and she tries to find her answers by leaving home: “Nora. I have other duties equally sacred...My duties towards myself...I

must think things out for myself, and try to get clear about them...I believe that I am first and foremost a human being like you” (DHIII.68). For her, the picture of the strange world is built up by the power of structural implication, which the latent possibilities of a long period of past time can be thrown into relief. In *A Doll's House*, the past is not only lighted up by the present, the past is actually changed by the present so that it becomes a different thing. Nora's marriage seems to change to eight years prostitution, as she gradually learns the true nature of her relations with Torvald and the true nature of Torvald's feelings for her, “you have never loved me. You just thought it was fun to be in love with me... I've learned now that certain laws are different from what I'd imagined them to be ... But now I intend to learn. I must try to satisfy myself which is right, society or I” (DHIII.66).

In his essay, “The Critique of Bourgeois Life,” Ronald Ng notes that “Throughout Ibsen's play, Nora asks for money or for favors that would prevent her secret from being leaked by playing her role as the ‘skylark,’ the ‘squirrel,’ and ‘songbird’ around Torvald” (263). For example, before asking her husband to let Krogstad keep his position at the bank, she desperately says, “Your squirrel will scamper about and do all her tricks, if you'll be nice and do what she asks... Your skylark'll sing all over the house-up and down the scale... I'll be a fairy and dance on a moonbeam for you...” (260). The “squirrel,” the “skylark” and the fairy are all characters that Nora plays their roles to get something in return. Torvald, however, thinks that these personas are genuine. After catching Nora in a lie, he says, “My little songbird mustn't ever do that again. A songbird must have a clear voice to sing with no false notes” (DHII.34). He obviously does not know that Nora's songbird character is itself a lie used to manipulate him. Nora is able to act out these characters to influence Torvald's decision. In *A Note on Ibsen and Nora's Doll Life*, LaleBehnam states “Nora[’s] lacks of authority pushes her to lies and tricks; she has to hide her competence because neither her husband nor society can endure it. Nora has to be Helmer's doll to survive. Nora has learned that there is no way out” (51). By recognizing her position in the society as a mother or wife and not a human being like men with equal values and rights, Nora says:

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 said nothing about them, because he wouldn't have liked it. He used to call me his doll-child, and played with me as I played with my dolls. Then I came to live in your house. (DHIII.66)

She says that her home has never been anything else but just a play room. Nora says Helmer that she leaves home because of her education: “I must educate myself. And you can't help me with that. It's something I must do by myself, that's why I'm leaving you...I must stand on my own feet if I am to find out the truth about myself and about

life” (DHIII.67). In the new step, she just thinks about her duty towards herself not her husband or children. According to Behnam, “[i]n *A Doll’s House* human beings are depicted as the victim of outside forces as conventions and social rules” (63). It should be noted that Ibsen himself has stressed on this matter that Nora is the kind of affectionate abbreviation that one uses to a child, and that Helmer employs it as Nora’s father has done. She is treated as their father’s or husbands’ property and puppet.

In the final moments of the play, Nora Helmer walks out on her husband and children, punctuating her departure with a slam of the door. Joan Templeton describes the impact of this scene on the original nineteenth century audience: “When Betty Hennings, the first Nora, slammed the door in Copenhagen’s Royal Theatre on December 21, 1879, her contemporaries were not, in what we have come to identify as the usual Victorian way, ‘shocked’; they were deeply shaken” (68). Michael Meyer also reminds us of “No play had ever before, contributed so momentously to the social debate, or been so widely and furiously discussed among people who were not normally interested in theatrical or even artistic matters” (Meyer, 1971a).

Conclusion

What the audiences saw was that once Nora was awakened, the kind of life Torvald imagines for her was a sort of death for Nora. Keavy Martin notes that “in Ibsen’s revolutionary plot twist was thereby stripped of its political impact; with the wife returned to her proper sphere, Victorian viewers could go about their lives without fear of social catastrophe” (187). Gail Finney writes that when she closes the door on her husband and children, she opens “the way to the turn-of-the-century women’s movement” (91). Indeed, society condemns Nora’s decision to abandon her duties as wife and mother: she is unscrupulous, unfeminine, and Ibsen, while creating her, has flouted the conventions not only of morality but of literary composition. Nora resists and rejects the domestic role and acts in opposition to the social conventions and morals. The problem portrayed in the play is about women’s rights, as human’s rights. It is about the need for every woman to find out herself and stand on her feet in order to recognize the truth about herself, her life and her society. Moreover, it is about the need of every woman for self-discovery and acting based on the truth even though that truth is opposed to the social acceptance and for fighting against social conventions in the search of the truth.

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