

Shift in the role of women in the society: Through the lens of A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen

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Abstract— Henrik Ibsen known as the father of modern drama, famously shifted the focus from the mighty settings of kings, wars, nobility in drama to the common folk bourgeois. His most noted work A Doll's House when first appeared in the theatres in 1879, was like a whirlwind of feminist questions in the society, it deepened the understanding of issues in people's minds then, and is still considered one of the most valiant plays in the contemporary times due to the voice of women and radical steps asserted in the play.

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Henrik Ibsen undoubtedly was an artist ahead of his times. We are discussing a play written in the Victorian era. We land in an era full of paradoxes: huge industrial success, a gaping gap between the rich and poor so where does the women folk find their voice in such a society? Well a difficult question. The Victorian era was a patriarchal society, the women were supposed to be subservient to men, they had to abide by the opinions, ideas and way of life according to the men in their lives. At such critical of times comes the beloved Ibsen. He rewrote the ways drama was written, famously called the father of modern drama. Though he always asserted that it was humanism rather than feminism that he evoked but definitely there are certain unforgettable imprints of the woman voices in his writings. UNESCO's memory of the world register calls Nora "a symbol throughout the world, for women fighting for liberation and equality". Henrik Ibsen imparts unimaginable powers to his heroine Nora in A Doll's House despite the middle class economic background in which the play is set. The ending scene in the drama A Doll's House, where Nora slams the door of the house and moves out in the chilly snow at midnight is one such example. This slamming of door scene created ripples of unrest in the then society. It was a hotly debated topic among all classes and among far fledged geography of the world. How could a woman think of leaving her children? How could a woman give up the sacred duties of a mother or a wife? Was it really necessary to seek the answers to the questions by going away alone into this

world? Could there have been a happy ending? Was it necessary to question or understand?

It was the explicit charm of Ibsen to conjure a character so deep as Nora. In the last conversation with Helmer we get a trace of her awakening as an individual:

" I don't believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are — or, at all events, that I must try and become one. I know quite well, Torvald, that most people would think you right, and that views of that kind are to be found in books; but I can no longer content myself with what most people say, or with what is found in books. I must think over things for myself and get to understand them."(3.234)

Nora is an unusual character in the society: a wedded woman for eight years and a mother of three children, well- settled but when she sees her utopian world falling apart and the shallowness of her husband's thought process, there is a reawakening that takes place in Nora. This was not the case from scratch. It was a perfect happy family for the Helmers, Christmas was approaching, Torvald Helmer got an appointment in a bank with a handsome salary, everything was to go smooth from then on but then enters Krogstad. Although Krogstad is not to be blamed after an extent. Nora was expecting something magical, something utopian from the side of her husband.

The depth, sacrifice and understanding of love are immeasurably deep. She expects the same from her husband. Nora had always been an independent soul which was veiled from the expectation and the conduct to be expected from her, by her father first, and then her husband. She was a discerning lady but got ended up being treated as pet by Torvald Helmer, nothing but as an ornament or possession in the collection of her husband. To an extent even her lies were a mode of service or a token of love for the people that she pleased. She did not want to superimpose her will, her likes and dislikes, her decisions over the people she adored. Torvald always saw Nora from his lens, though her repeated requests of not firing Krogstad and his adamant approach to do the opposite gets a reader to think that they had severe understanding and communication issues in their relationship. The couple is superficially in love as Nora puts it they have not had any serious discussion, never came to the bottom of a thing: "You have never loved me. You have only thought it pleasant to be in love with me." Christine Linde, Nora's friend had her own perspective of seeing Nora. This conversation makes things more clear:

"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"(1.45)

Although Christine is a well-wisher of Nora she has her own vibes of superiority. Her decision of not stopping Krogstad and deciding for Nora, does make some people giddy of her attitude.

Henrik Ibsen marvellously brought his audience into regular people's homes where the bourgeois kept their carefully guarded secrets. *A Doll's House* had a profound effect on the society: marriage was revealed as far from being a divine institution. People stopped regarding marriage as an absolute provider of bliss; and divorce between incompatible parties came to be at last accepted as conceivably justifiable. No other play had achieved that

much. Reality was different from fanciful notions of love. Let us dig deep into the insights of Ibsen on *A Doll's House*, his notes which positively reflect the tornado of women emancipation in his thought process:

"Notes for the Tragedy of Modern Times, Rome, 19 October 1878

There are two kinds of moral law, two kinds of conscience, one in man and a completely different one in woman. They do not understand each other; but in matters of practical living the woman is judged by man's law, as if she were not a woman but a man.

The wife in the play ends up quite bewildered and not knowing right from wrong; her natural instincts on the one side and her faith in authority on the other leave her completely confused.

A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view.

She has committed a crime, and she is proud of it; because she did it for love of her husband and to save his life. But the husband, with his conventional views of honour, stands on the side of the law and looks at the affair with male eyes.

Mental conflict. Depressed and confused by her faith in authority, she loses faith in her moral right and ability to bring up her children. Bitterness. A mother in contemporary society, just as certain insects go away and die when she has done her duty in the propagation of the race [sic]. Love of life, of home and husband and children and family. Now and then, woman-like, she shrugs off her thoughts. Sudden return of dread and terror. Everything must be borne alone. The catastrophe approaches, ineluctably, inevitably. Despair, resistance, defeat."

Money is an important tenet in the feminism theory and a constant under current theme in *A Doll's House*. The borrowing of money in the time of need; a very quick and compassionate action on her side, only shows the strength of Nora's decisions. Her hiding of the fact of

borrowing, thriftiness in the matters the following years reflects the profundity to which she is absorbed in the relationship:

“Whenever Torvald has given me money for new dresses and such things, I have never spent more than half of it; I have always bought the simplest and cheapest things. Thank Heaven, any clothes look well on me, and so Torvald has never noticed it. But it was often very hard on me, Christine--because it is delightful to be really well dressed, isn't it?”(1.97)

The deep questions that Nora raises in her last conversation with Torvald shows her level of detachment and disillusionment. If one compares and contrasts this text with Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*, the heroine there does not slam the door but continues to live in a suffocating society, Geeta shrouds her way of life and tries to adjust with the environment her parents chose for her, there is a line where she says she is 'hypnotised' by the scene, that how could she ever think of leaving the haveli. It is absolutely astonishing that a hundred years back Ibsen gave her heroine immense powers, under a middle class background: she first has the duty to herself then comes the entire world:

“I don't believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are — or, at all events, that I must try and become one. I know quite well, Torvald, that most people would think you right, and that views of that kind are to be found in books; but I can no longer content myself with what most people say, or with what is found in books. I must think over things for myself and get to understand them.”(3.234)

CONCLUSION

It is an absolute delight to read the drama *A Doll's House* with a tinge of feminist perspective. Henrik Ibsen beautifully and strongly creates an unforgettable and strengthened character such as Nora. It is not only Nora but Torvald Hemer whose eyes are opened and he too is a witness of this reawakening in the play. *A Doll's House* when first appeared in the theatres in 1879 it was like a whirlwind of feminist questions in the society, it deepened the understanding of issues in people's heads then and is still considered one of the most valiant plays in the contemporary times due to the voice of women and radical

steps asserted in the play. This play is nothing less than a revolution in the field of gender roles, place and importance of individualism in the society then and now.

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