



A CRITICAL STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL VERSUS SOCIETY IN HENRIK IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

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Abstract: The focus of this paper, 'A Critical Study of Individual Versus Society in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*' is to give a vivid idea about the society's dynamics and the position of women in the latter half of the nineteenth century. *A Doll's House* is one of the most celebrated plays of Henrik Ibsen. The play revolves around the Helmer family whose delusional world of happiness and harmony is shattered by a revelation from the past followed by Nora's journey of self-realization and liberation. Furthermore, Ibsen brings out the pain and struggle of each of the characters who are the victims of societal pressures and senseless expectations. He shows how the characters in the play are puppets in the hands of the society which forces them to compromise with their values and moral standards, and most importantly expects women to accept an inferior status to men and be dependent on them. Through Nora's character, Ibsen depicts how the society requires women to keep obeying the men in their life and not have a voice of their own. The end of the play signifies Nora's act of rebellion against patriarchy where she leaves her husband's house to undertake a journey of finding her true self as she realizes that all her life she has only been a 'doll' without an opinion or voice of her own, firstly in her father's house and then at her husband's.

Index Terms – Individual versus society, liberation, position of women, self-realization, societal pressures

I. INTRODUCTION

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen was published in the year 1879 and it was performed for the first time in the same year. This play belongs to the genre of Realist Modern drama. The play revolves around an ordinary family- Nora Helmer, her husband Torvald Helmer and their three children. The roles in the family are divided in such a way that Torvald assumes the position of the master of the family and his wife Nora is responsible for taking care of the kids and for performing the household chores. When the play was performed for the first time, it gathered a lot of criticism for its ending where Nora abandons her family because of the societal codes of those times.

Henrik Ibsen was born in 1828 in a rich family of Skein, in Norway. He believed that he and his wife should live as equals who should be free to become their own beings. Like his personal life, his plays also attacked the stereotypes and gender inequality existing in the then society. In 1864, he left his wife and son and moved to Dresden, in Germany which is where he wrote his most famous work *A Doll's House*. Since then his popularity kept on growing and his works became the most often performed plays after Shakespeare in spite of being considered 'inappropriate' or 'scandalous'. Also, he was often criticized for disrespecting the institution of marriage. Henrik Ibsen is very rightly regarded as the pioneer of Modernism and the 'Father of Realism'. In his later works, he also began to tackle issues of subconscious or psychological nature.

A Doll's House very vividly reflects the state of the times in which it was written. During the 1870s, the society was driven by extremely strict and conservative Victorian moral and social codes. Women, particularly married women had very limited rights. Women were not allowed to indulge in any kind of financial transactions. A lot of women who ran their own businesses or earned their own wages could not marry because of the restrictions regarding property rights. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century women were awarded their rights to vote and to own property. But even then, women did not share equal status in the society. This is what the play represents. Torvald Helmer assumes the position of the 'man of the house' where he handles all the finances and single-handedly takes all the decisions for the family while the woman of the family, Nora is a doting wife whose life is centered around her children and in making her husband happy. The central problem of the play is when Nora commits an act greater than the position that the society assigns her with. This shows the way the society restricts the freedom of a woman or restricts her life to the four walls of the husband's house. A lot of critics labeled this play as scandalous because of Ibsen's portrayal of family abandonment by a woman, marriage customs and the act of rebellion by a wife.

The play *A Doll's House* is loosely based on the real life story of his friend Laura Kieler who was the main inspiration for Nora's character and the separation of Torvald and Nora. Although, Kieler did not commit forgery but, when her husband discovered her secret debt he not only divorced her but also forced her to move to an insane asylum. *A Doll's House* was written

by Ibsen to defend his friend, in a way. He also shows the fate of the couples whose married life is based out of dominance of the husband and the suppression of the wife.

II. The Play at a Glance

The play introduces Nora as an average housewife who does not work whose only job is to look after the house and her children. She enters the house holding packages. A Christmas tree is also delivered by the porter as it is the Christmas evening. Torvald Helmer, her husband comes out of the study to greet her. Nora puts on display all the Christmas gifts that she has brought with her while Torvald playfully teases her for being a spendthrift by calling her 'little squirrel' and 'little skylark'. Torvald and Nora also celebrate the fact that Torvald has now been promoted and their financial condition is going to improve. Just then Dr. Rank and Mrs. Linde arrive. Nora and Mrs. Linde start to talk while Torvald exits into his study along with Dr. Rank. As Mrs. Linde sees Nora for the first time in eight years, she tells her about her unhappy marriage, her life as a widow and the loneliness that her life is filled with. Nora then promises her that she will ask her husband to give her a job in the bank. Nora then reveals to her a secret. She says that when she and Torvald were newly married she borrowed some money to plan a trip to Italy which was important to save her husband's life. She reveals that she secret took part time jobs and saved money from the allowance that Torvald gave her in order to repay the money in installments. A while later, Nils Krogstad from the Bank arrives at the house and goes into Torvald's study. When Dr. Rank comes out he tells Nora that he finds Krogstad to be morally corrupt. Torvald later comes out and promises Mrs. Linde to give her a job. Everyone else exits and Nora is left to play with her children. The readers then come to know that Nora had borrowed the money from Krogstad. He reveals that Torvald is going to fire him and Nora must not let this happen or else her secret will be out. As he leaves, he even blackmails her that he would reveal Nora's act of forging her father's signature while he was on his death bed. When Torvald comes back she requests him to not fire Krogstad but he refuses.

Act Two begins with Nora worrying about her secret coming out on the day of Christmas. Nora and Mrs. Linde work towards sewing Nora's dress for the Boxing Day ball where she plans to dress as a Fisher girl and dance with Torvald to the tarantella. Once Torvald enters, Nora again tries to persuade him to not remove Krogstad from his position. This irritates Torvald and he decides to fire him immediately. Then, Dr. Rank comes in and reveals to Nora that he will die very soon. Nora and Dr. Rank flirt and express their affection towards each other. Krogstad arrives and threatens Nora again, expressing his wish to run the bank someday. He leaves a document containing Nora's act of forgery in their letterbox and then leaves. Mrs. Linde tells Nora that she and Krogstad were in a relationship in the past so she wants to talk to him while Nora distracts Torvald. As Nora and Torvald rehearse for the tarantella, Mrs. Linde leaves a note for Krogstad.

In Act three, Krogstad comes to meet Mrs. Linde and it is revealed that they were once in love but Mrs. Linde left him for marrying a richer man. Now that their spouses are no more and they are single, Mrs. Linde proposes Krogstad to marry her. Hearing this Krogstad is thrilled and they decide to get married. Krogstad even regrets his cunning actions and thinks of taking the letter back but Mrs. Linde stops him from doing so and says that truth should come out ultimately. Later, Krogstad leaves as Nora and Torvald return from the Boxing Day ball. Mrs. Linde even advises Nora to tell her husband the truth and leaves. Nora and Torvald spend some time alone after which Dr. Rank arrives. And he leaves a post card revealing that he will die very soon. Nora makes up her mind to commit suicide as the fear of her secret coming out in front of her husband was too much for her. Later, Torvald discovers Krogstad's letter and gets furious with Nora. He accuses Nora of ruining his life and spoiling his reputation before everyone. He wishes to keep no ties with her but wants her to stay in the same house so that she must not continue to raise her children while everything should remain normal in the eyes of the society.

The house maid brings in a note from Krogstad that he regrets his actions and now he will not blackmail Nora anymore. This makes Torvald extremely happy and relieved. He suddenly calms down and tells Nora that she is forgiven. This incident proves to be an eye opener for Nora; she tells Torvald that she was going to commit suicide because she did not want Torvald to risk his job to defend her against this crime of forgery. But this reaction from Torvald made her realise that he never really loved her and all of Nora's love and efforts were fruitless. She explains to him that their marriage was nothing more than a game of flattery. There never really had a substantial conversation or worked towards building a strong bond for their relationship. She also realizes that Torvald never considered her capable enough to share things with or have a meaningful conversation with. She finally says that she cannot live in the same house with Torvald and she cannot continue with this marriage. So she wishes to leave her husband and children and discover her real self. At first, Torvald shouts at her for being insane and impulsive but later he plays the victim and begs her to stay. Nora pays no attention to him and slams the door to leave the house forever while Torvald is left alone on the stage in despair.

III. Nora Helmer's Character

Nora Helmer is the female protagonist of the play who is a young woman married to Torvald Helmer with whom she has three children. She is introduced as someone who is sweet, chirpy and carefree; she does not seem to mind when other characters like Mrs. Linde or Torvald call her a spendthrift. The nicknames with which Torvald addresses her- 'little squirrel', 'little skylark', 'songbird' etc. show that she likes to be treated or pampered like a child which is also reflected in the way Torvald stops her from eating macaroons like a child. The first impression that the audience get is that Nora loves her husband a lot, she is very obedient towards him and her sole aim is to keep him happy at all times. This also implies that her husband does not think of her as a matured adult but as a child who needs to be told what is right or wrong because she is a woman. Clearly, this marriage is not based on equality or even honesty because it turns out that Nora has not been honest to her husband as she secretly borrowed money and committed forgery.

Nora is a person who has lived her life as a puppet in the hands of the men of her life, firstly her father and then Torvald. Until the end of the play she could not even realize that she has never really done anything for herself, in fact she has never thought about who she really is, what her opinions are and what she wants in life. It is only when Torvald openly expresses that he loves his reputation more than Nora, she realizes that she has never been loved by Torvald but only controlled by him. It is only at the end of the play that Nora realizes that her understanding of self, this marriage and the world was all wrong because she has not lived that life of a human being but of a doll who was only expected to obey the men in her life and not use her brain. Her plight is revealed in the lines:

"I have been your doll wife, just as at home I was Daddy's doll child. And the children in turn have been my dolls. I thought it was fun when you came and played with me, just as they thought it was fun when I went to play with them. That's been our marriage Torvald." (Ibsen, Act 3)

Finally, Nora makes a huge independent decision of going away from her house and this senseless marriage to explore the world around her and find her true self. This act of breaking away from the chains that society had imposed on her, she emerges as a symbol of strength and empowerment. Through Nora's character, Ibsen presents his stance on the position of women in the then society, he shows that a woman must not live under the bondages that the society ties her to, should have the freedom to be her own self in life and must take nothing less than equality in a marriage. Nora's journey from a naïve, immature and childish girl who spends all her time and energy in trying to impress her husband, to a determined, independent and empowered woman who is ready to find purpose and perspective in her life, represents every woman's journey of self-exploration and self-realization. The character of Nora shows that a woman's identity is beyond entertainment and frivolity. Ibsen also shows how a woman is forced to remain dependent on her husband whether financially or otherwise because the society assigns certain duties to her gender; Nora is also a victim of such strict gender roles of the Victorian society which did not want a woman to be financially or emotionally independent thus compelling them to submit to their husbands. The issue of financial dependence is highlighted when Nora recalls saving money and states:

"But it was tremendous fun at all same, sitting there and earning money like that. Almost like being a man."(Ibsen, Act 2)

A Doll's House presents a vivid image of the way women were made to succumb to patriarchal expectations like Nora who represents the conventional female of that era. A lot of critics criticized Nora's act of rebellion as selfish but Ibsen's purpose was to highlight the fact that a woman's identity is much more important than the roles that are assigned to her by the society. It is also important to note that Nora's behavior changes when she talks to Mrs. Linde, a woman and with Torvald, her husband. While talking to Mrs. Linde one can see a sense of authority and self-confidence in her voice and body language but while talking to her husband there is a clear difference, she regards Torvald as her superior whose validation and happiness is the driving force of Nora's life. Therefore, Nora Helmer's character analysis is extremely significant when it comes to the understanding of the theme of Individual versus Society in the play *A Doll's House* because Nora represents the conventional woman of that era who lived her life under the chains of patriarchy and gender roles but one incident proves to be the turning point of her life where she gathers courage to give up the life of a puppet or a doll to embark on a journey of self-exploration.

IV. Individual versus Society

Nora Helmer is a woman who has put others before herself all her life. When she lived with her father before getting married, her decisions and opinions were all governed by her father. Then, she got married to Torvald so all she did was work towards keeping him happy and lastly she channelized all her efforts into keeping her children happy. Thus, she never did anything for herself. She never even thought of how her decisions would affect her personally, she did everything in order to provide a more comfortable life to her family. Firstly, she independently took the decision of borrowing money from Krogstad and then committed forgery in order to finance a trip to Italy so that Torvald's life can be saved as he had been ill. She kept this act a secret so that she does not trouble Torvald and she kept doing odd jobs to repay the debts in spite of not knowing anything about handling finances so that she does not bother Torvald for money. This shows she took charge of her own decisions. Also, towards the end of the play when she makes up her mind to take her own life, she does so to save Torvald because she thought that he would defend her which would put his job and reputation at risk. Throughout the play there are numerous evidences to prove that Nora really loved Torvald without even realizing that his reputation was much more valuable to him than Nora. Thus, Nora's life is defined by the roles that the society required her to play- of a daughter, a wife and a mother. This is evident through the following lines:

"When I lived at home with Daddy, he fed me all his opinions, until they became my opinions. Or if they didn't I kept quiet about it because I knew he wouldn't have liked it. He used to call me his doll child, and played with me the way I used to play with my dolls. And when...Daddy handed me over to you. You arranged everything according to your taste, and I adapted my taste to yours...Now, looking back, I feel as if I've lived a beggar's life- from hand to mouth."(Ibsen, Act 3)

The other female character of the play is Mrs. Linde who, a widow who lives a life of extreme loneliness and later decides to marry Krogstad. At various points in the play, Mrs. Linde expresses that she feels that her life is meaningless because she has no husband or kids to take care of. She also feels that it feels pointless to take care of oneself when there is nobody else to take care of. This was the main reason why she decided to marry Krogstad. This shows that both these female characters- Mrs. Linde and Nora believe that serving others, particularly the men in their life gives their existence some meaning and purpose. This means that these women derive their happiness through the roles that the society imposes on them. However, Nora realizes through the course of the play that serving others all her life has resulted in her loss of identity and has not given her any real happiness. She realized that prioritizing others over herself has not given her any respect or happiness. She also realizes that the person for whose happiness she did everything (Torvald) would never do anything for her. Thus she abandons this baseless idea of love and gets rid of her toxic marriage in order to find a sense of self. Therefore she as an individual stands tall against the expectations of the society. It is also important to note that the reason behind Torvald's anger and frustration was not just the fact that his career and reputation was in danger but what infuriated him the most was the way Nora independently took a decision and owned up to it. It was her capabilities and maturity that hurt his pride. He could not stand the fact that her intellect was beyond frivolity and entertainment. He could not accept that Nora would decide things without his approval because he was used to her submission and subjugation towards him. The fact that Nora had stepped out of the line that the society had created for her is what made Torvald extremely angry and frustrated.

Henrik Ibsen wants its readers to acknowledge the character of Nora, her life and her act of rebellion as an individual first and then as a woman which establishes that this play portrays the conflict between an individual and the society. Not only Nora, but the other characters are also part of the same struggle. Firstly Krogstad tries to redeem himself and earn respect from the same society that punished him. Secondly, Mrs. Linde chooses a richer man over Krogstad because that seems to be a better way to survive against the society. Unlike the other women of her times, she had a career in front of her but it failed to give her any happiness because as an individual she was required to fulfill the roles that the society expected out of her. Lastly, Torvald's life revolves around his job and his reputation because this is the way in which he wants to win against the society. That means the society expected him to play the role of a financially stable and intelligent man who is superior to his wife. Thus all the characters are involved in this struggle against the society as individuals.

The title of the play is also very significant in this context because it clearly emphasizes that Nora was nothing but a doll in the hands of the society. According to some thinkers, individuals become the pawns of the society the moment they enter into this world; every individual is expected to conform to the society's ideology sooner or later. This is what becomes the central problem

of the play where all the characters, especially Nora become the victims of the society and its regulations. *A Doll's House* refers to the doll-like characters of the play who were just like puppets governed by the society. The play gives a clear picture of the pattern in which the individual characters were oppressed by the society and they in turn subjugated the individuals whom the society placed beneath them. This is very evident in the case of Torvald and Nora. Torvald was also under extreme pressure of the society and he treated Nora like a doll, exactly the way the society treated him. This way the women suffered the most as Nora did in the play. But Ibsen chose not to make peace with the society winning over the individual. He deliberately wrote the ending of the play in such a way that the individual is allowed to be their own self, the way Nora is empowered to choose a life of her own, she successfully breaks the walls that the society constructed for her and chose the path of self-exploration and the path of finding her real identity, over the stereotypical gender roles which chained her for most of her life. After spending a huge part of her life in carrying out the duties of the society she finally realizes the duties that she had towards herself. This is expressed in the following lines:

"I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are- or at least I am going to try to be. I know most people agree with you, Torvald, and that's also what it says in books. But I'm not content anymore with what most people say, or what it says in books. I have to think things for myself, and get things clear." (Ibsen, Act 3)

Through this play, Ibsen brutally exposes the hypocrisy of the society which believed that women are inferior to men; a notion very deeply ingrained in the nineteenth century society. However, Ibsen's purpose was bigger than this. He wrote this play to make every individual, (whether a man or a woman) realize that they should feel free to be their own self in this world, they should not succumb to the mould into which the society wants them to fit in. They must strive to find their real identity, purpose and perspective in life, even if it comes at the cost of a rebellious act like Nora's. Ibsen's purpose is to bring justice towards humanity which is why he uses a broader lens of human concern in the play. Thus, he emerges as a true humanitarian by highlighting this conflict of individual versus the society.

V. Conclusion

A Doll's House is one of Henrik Ibsen's most famous works which brought a wave of revolution into modern literature. This play is not only a great contribution towards feminist literature but also humanist literature. Undoubtedly, Ibsen lays bare the plight of women in the then society but away from this perspective he constructs this play around the complex psyche of characters who are victims of societal prejudices and who want to reconstruct their respective identities. Ibsen has not only given a lot of thought to the creation of these individual characters but also in the relationship dynamics between those characters. Ibsen very beautifully keeps shifting the focus of the play from Nora's struggle to the identity crisis of the characters. But a factor that remains common to both these perspectives is that it is the society which is constantly challenging their self-esteem and integrity. So, Ibsen's real message was that every individual must develop a sense of self. Here, Nora not only emerges as an example for women around the world who suffer dominance and oppression but to people in general as she heavily emphasizes upon the significance of finding one's identity. She finally realizes that she has not only been a doll to her husband or father but to this patriarchal society as a whole.

Thus, Ibsen's play echoes with the idea of justice to women and justice for humanity while he establishes an intimate connection between the two. Another very significant feature of the play is its relevance. Although Ibsen takes the then society as his play's background, which was driven by strict moral and social codes but he also universalizes the idea of this play which is why its themes are very relevant even in the contemporary times because the marginalization of women, the issue of identity of individuals in the mechanized world, inequality in marriages and the lacking sense of self in individuals is prevalent even today. So, *A Doll's House* proves to be a revolutionary play in this sense. More than anything else Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is a play about empowerment, self-realization, equality and freedom.

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