

THE EMERGENCE OF REALISM IN HENRIK IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

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Abstract:

*A Doll's House is a play written by Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian playwright. The play is set in Norway, but when we talk about the social conditions of the women, social etiquette of Norway or any other country in Europe, we find similar characteristics. It is nothing but a zeitgeist (the direction of the thought of the era). The 1870s were dominated by strict Victorian social codes and laws that severely restricted the rights of all women and married women in particular. The Governments throughout Europe used the Napoleonic Code or The Civil Code of 1804. It systemizing family and property law, denied a woman all civil and political rights, banished her from professions, and did not allow her even to enter into a contractual agreement without the written consent of her husband or father, much less to live outside of his domicile. Naturally zeitgeist of the era is reflected in the literature of the time throughout Europe like in Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Ibsen's works caused an uproar because of his candid portrayals of the middle classes, complete with infidelity, unhappy marriages, and corrupt businessmen. Ibsen completely modified the rules of drama with realism. Several of his later dramas were considered scandalous, because when European theatre was expected to model strict morals of family life and propriety. Ibsen's later work examined the realities that lay behind the facades, revealing much that was disquieting to a number of his contemporaries. He had a critical eye and conducted a free inquiry into the conditions of life and issues of morality. One such play is *A Doll's House*.*

Keywords: *Realism, Zeitgeist, Forgery, Spendthrift, Macaroons, Individuality, Sensibility, Education, Independence.*

The Research article focuses on the social condition of women in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's house*. Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was a Norwegian playwright, theatre director, and a poet. Norway is a beautiful Scandinavian country. It is called as the land of the midnight sun, where the northern lights dance across endless skies. At present Norway is one of the most developed countries of the world. Norwegian literature has achieved a remarkable position in the world literature, especially the translated works in English has achieves popularity world-wide. The late 19th century is considered as the Golden Age of Norwegian literature due to the emergence of the four great literary figures: Henrik Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Alexander Kielland, and Jonas Lie. Henrik Ibsen is a strong contributor to early Norwegian romanticism, he is one of the founders of modernism in theatre, Ibsen is one of the most influential playwrights of his time. His major works includes *An Enemy of the People, A Doll's House, Hedda Gabler, Ghosts, The Wild Duck, The Pillars of Society, The Master Builder*. He is the most frequently performed dramatist in the world after Shakespeare, and by the early 20th century *A Doll's House* became the world's most performed play. He influenced other playwrights and novelists such as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Miller, James Joyce, and Eugene O'Neill with his phenomenal works. Ibsen was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1902, 1903, and 1904 for his contribution in the literature.

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was published and first performed in December 1879. *A Doll's House* is a Modern Realistic Tragedy in three- acts and can be read in a single sitting. A play is set in a town or city of Norway in the span of three days the Christmas Eve, the Christmas Day and the day after the

Christmas. *A Doll's House* is originally written in Norwegian and later translated in English and many other languages, which took the whole world by storm because of its scathing criticism of the blind acceptance of traditional roles of men and women in Victorian marriage and the Governments throughout Europe used the Napoleonic Code or The Civil Code of 1804, which restricted women in all spheres of life and made them dependent on the male members of their family. There were a lot of restrictions on married women; they were banned from having a profession and earning money. Many women who conducted their own business or earned their own wages chose not to marry because the laws regarding what married women could do when it comes to finances were so limiting:

In Victorian literature from Richardson until the early twentieth century the plot pattern of English fiction were based on the view (should by reader and writer) that what was significant was that altered a social relationship - love followed by marriage, quarreling and reconciliation, gain or loss of money or of social status (Daiches 700).

By the beginning of the twentieth century, things began to change as the female suffrage movement swept over Europe and the world and the women were awarded rights such as the right to own property and the right to vote. However, for most people in the late 1870s, such eventualities were not yet even a distant dream. *A Doll's House* caused quite the scandal for its criticism of nineteenth century marriage customs and portrayal of a woman abandoning her family in order to gain a sense of self. Ibsen wrote an alternative ending because he was pressurized by several theatres, in which Nora, upon seeing her children, changes her mind and stays with Torvald. He later regretted doing this, calling the adapted ending "a barbaric outrage."

A Doll's House enacts a journey of a young woman, Nora Helmer from being a perfect house wife to abandoning her family in order to educate herself. Nora is happily married to Torvald Helmer, a barrister and is recently appointed as the bank manager. They are married for eight years and they have three children Ivar, Bob and Emmy. During the first year of their marriage Torvald had grown serious illness and in order to save his life the doctor advised Nora to take her husband to the South i.e. Italy to recuperation. Nora decided to borrow money as a loan in order to expense their trip to Italy from Nils Krogstad. Nils Krogstad is a lawyer and a money lender, who has a bad reputation in the society because he did forgery in order to save his dying wife and tactfully escaped the punishment in the court. Krogstad extends the loan of two hundred and fifty pounds to Nora on a condition that she has to produce someone as her security. Nora's circumstances were extreme at that time she was heavily pregnant and her father was counting his last days. She did not want to trouble her father by asking to sign the security bond and get him worried. She forged the signature of her father and mentioned the date below the sign as 2nd October. Krogstad knew that Nora's father died on 29th September and he suspected that may be Nora has forged her father's signature. However, Krogstad extend loan to Nora. Since then Nora worked hard and paid the loan in quarterly installments. She was successful in hiding this big secret from Torvald. Torvald has been appointed as the bank manager, which will improve their financial prospective. Nora and Torvald were very much in love and happily leaving with their children and ever thing seemed to be perfectly fine until the storm strikes and a wonderful thing happens.

Mrs. Christine Linde is a childhood friend of Nora. She comes to meet Nora after ten long years to ask her help in securing a small post in the bank with Nora's influence and Mr. Helmer's help. It has also been revealed that Christine and Krogstad were lovers, before Christine jilted poor Krogstad and married a rich man, who can support Christine's ill mother and her two little brothers. At the present time Krogstad is working as a clerk in the bank. Torvald decides to help Mrs. Linde by appointing her as a clerk by dismissing Krogstad from his post. Krogstad blackmails Nora to stop Torvald from firing him from his post in the bank. Krogstad tells Nora that he will not take any legal action against her, but he will keep the bond with him and blackmail Torvald to help him to get promoted. Krogstad writes Nora's secret in a letter and mails to Torvald. Nora was sure that when Torvald will know about her act of forgery, he will tell Krogstad

to publish it to the whole world and he will take the blame on himself because of his love for her. This is the wonderful thing which Nora was expecting and she is also fearful about Torvald's reputation getting trashed. Nora tells her secret to Christine. Christine talks to Krogstad and they decide to renew their relationship. Krogstad becomes overwhelmed with this happy change and decides to take his letter back from Helmer. Christine stops him because she wants that the secret should be revealed and Nora and Helmer have no deceit in their marriage. Torvald reads the letter sent by Krogstad and scolds Nora and blames her for the trouble he has to suffer from Krogstad to save his reputation. Later, Krogstad sends the debt bond back along with the letter of apology to Nora. As soon as the threat is over Torvald becomes loving husband and forgives Nora. But Nora realises the true nature of her husband and leaves him. She goes back to her maiden home to educate herself and be independent enough to understand the ways of the world and survive in it.

At the beginning of the play one gets the impression of Nora as a person who is full of life, spendthrift and happily spending her life as a doll wife with Mr. Torvald Helmer. He is an epitome of masculine dominance in the Victorian sense. Torvald is projected as a very loving husband, who regularly treats Nora as a child. He does not think of her as a proper adult because she is a woman. During that time, the men dominated every aspects of life. Nora happily plays along with Torvald's pet names for her such as 'little skylark', 'little songbird', 'little spendthrift', 'little featherhead', 'little squirrel', 'extravagant little person', 'poor little girl', and so on. A blissful marriage life is displayed:

HELMER: Is that my little lark twittering out there?

NORA: Yes, it is!

HELMER: Is it my little squirrel bustling about?

NORA: Yes!

HELMER: When did my squirrel come home? (Ibsen- Act-I- 8).

Before the twentieth century, the men are the sole providers of the family. Helmer worked hard and provided for his family. He is also a strongly opinionated individual, who despise any sort of borrowing from others and considered it as same to his capability of earning enough for his family. When Nora suggested for borrowing for the Christmas celebration, he strongly condemns and tells her, "That is like a woman! But seriously, Nora, you know what I think about that. No debt, no borrowing. There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt" (Ibsen- Act- I- 9).

Nora is well aware of the attitude of Helmer and also about the rule that a wife is not allowed to borrow without her husband's consent. She is also aware of the punishment she will get if she gets caught for the act of forgery. Hence she keeps the deal between Krogstad and her secret. She had a very pure intension behind breaking this societal rule and committing forgery but law does not care about the intensions but evidence. Krogstad tells Nora, "The law care nothing about motives" (Ibsen- Act- I- 40).

Nora is aware of her restricted role in the society. She sees freedom and fulfillment in earning money and being independent, it gives her a sense of pride. She gets upset when Christine calls her a child and tells her that she is unaware of the problems of life. Nora tells Christine about her secret of borrowing the loan proudly. She does needlework, crochet-work, embroidery, coping and that kind of things and pays the huge loan of two hundred and fifty pounds in the quarterly installments. Nora tells Christine about her work experience with great pride:

NORA: Well, then I have found other ways of earning money. Last winter I was lucky enough to get a lot of copying to do; so I locked myself up and sat writing every evening until quite late at night. Many a time I was desperately tired; but all the same it was a tremendous pleasure to sit there working and earning money. It was like being a man (Ibsen-Act- I- 24).

Helmer is in full control of all the household and financial affairs and he also restricts Nora from eating macaroon (a sweet dish) and swearing just like one restricts their own children and not wife. This

shows his dominant nature. Helmer is quite possessive of Nora, he wants her all to himself. Nora once tells Christine about Torvald's possessive and dominant nature:

NORA: That is quite right, Christine. Torvald is so absurdly fond of me that he wants me absolutely to himself, as he says. At first he used to seem almost jealous if I mentioned any of my folk at home, so naturally I gave up doing so. But I often talk about such things with Doctor Rank, because he likes hearing about them (Ibsen-Act- II- 51).

Dr. Rank is a very close friend of Helmer and Nora and visits them often. He is suffering from the consumption of spine and is counting his last days. On the Christmas Day, he tells Nora that he has always loved her, but Nora does not return his feelings. She tells him that he is a good companion to her, she feels much freedom to talk to him because he is not opinionated and restricts her as Helmer does.

Individuality is the most important thing in the life. But in the older days women are not entitled to express their free will, they were subjected to submit before their father, husband or sons. Helmer also exhibits his possessiveness when Nora wants to stay a little longer in the fancy dress party but Helmer ignored even a small wish of Nora and brings her to home forcefully. Helmer is not a sensible man. He is full of pretense and hypocrisy. He has biased opinion about women. Helmer tells to Nora, "My dear, I have often seen it in the course of my life as a lawyer. Almost everyone who has gone to the bad early in life has had a deceitful mother" (Ibsen-Act- I-45).

Helmer dislikes Krogstad and chides him as a moral failure due to his past act of forgery. In Helmer's opinion Krogstad should have submitted himself to the court and taken the punishment but he played tricks and got out of the punishment. Helmer is not sensible enough to see the motives behind the crime committed by an individual and he is judgmental.

Helmer's opinion about their dear friend Dr. Rank shocks Nora when he comments upon the letters dropped by Dr. Rank, where he declared his time of death is nearing and forbid them to see him in his last days of suffering. Helmer says, "He has so grown into our lives. I can't think of him as having gone out of them. He, with his sufferings and his loneliness, was like a cloudy background to our sunlit happiness. Well, perhaps it is best so. For him, anyway. And perhaps for us too, Nora" (Ibsen-Act- III-94).

Helmer has also commented on Christine as a frightful bore and he is happy that she left their home early. This shows that some people seem to be genuine but they are only pretending and Helmer is one such man. A man's reputation, his social status is of the prime importance in the Victorian society or prior to the twentieth century. But times are changing now and even women have gained social status and are highly reputed in the society. Helmer's reputation is the most important thing in his life. He valued his pride and false reputation more than his love for Nora. When he read a letter sent by Krogstad and Nora's act of forgery is revealed, Helmer changed from loving husband to a hypocrite. He was worried about his reputation and the amount of favor he has to extend to Krogstad in order to save his pride. He accuses Nora for her act of forgery ignoring her selfless motive and love for him behind it, "What a horrible awakening! All these eight years- she who was my joy and pride- a hypocrite, a liar- worse, worse- a criminal! The unutterable ugliness of it all!- For shame! For shame!" (Ibsen-Act- III-97).

Helmer accuses Nora for destroying his happiness and forbids her to raise her children and he states that from henceforth their marriage will be pretense to show the world. When Krogstad sends the bond back with a letter of apology to Nora, Helmer realizes that his reputation is no longer in danger. He forgives Nora and promises her that he will guide her in the future to take decisions as per his conscience. But Nora seeing his true colours, his controlling nature and most of all his false love towards her and leaves him. She decides to leave him and be a sensible, educated and independent woman. Nora also realizes that she has always been a doll-child to her father and accepted his opinions and later when she got married to Helmer, she accepted his opinions blindly and molded herself into it. She never had her own perception of life. Helmer tries to stop her from leaving the house. He scolds her and says that she does not have the sense of duty towards her husband and children and she lacks moral conscience and religious consciousness. But

Nora is determined to educate herself. She realizes that her most sacred duty is to educate herself, to know about the society, its laws and its religious and moral code of the conduct and be a reasonable individual.

Conclusion

In *A Doll's House* two couples can be seen, the first couple is Nora and Helmer they are almost perfect at the beginning but pride, false reputation, inequality in gender roles, suppressed position of women in the society and male ego of Helmer all these leads to the separation of them. The second couple is Christine and Krogstad, they are lovers separated by the tough circumstances years back, now reunited because they both are lonely and still in love with each other. Krogstad had committed forgery to save his wife's life and escaped from the punishment. He had indulged in illegal activities driven by the disparities. He has also blackmailed Nora and threatened her that he will expose her secret. But he is ready to start his life with Christine because she believes in his real character. Krogstad returns the bond of debt to Helmers and apologize for blackmailing Nora. The juxtaposition of Helmer and Krogstad can be seen in *A Doll's House*. The reversal of the role is visible here Helmer, who played the protagonist becomes an antagonist and Krogstad who is an antagonist becomes a good man in the end. Henrik Ibsen's play led to the emergence of the modern realism in the theatre by breaking the age old norms of the Victorian society and literature. He showed the reality and problems of the society behind sophisticated mask in his plays.

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