

## Interrogating the Hegemonic Male-Chauvinistic Socio-Cultural Backgrounds and Emancipation of Women: A Study of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

**Suresh Kumar**

Assistant Professor, SLET, UGC-NET  
Department of English  
Govt. College Seraj, Lambathach, 175048  
Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, India  
[vijaysuresh8890@gmail.com](mailto:vijaysuresh8890@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) is considered one of the most significant dramatists in the world. He ponders over and reflects the socio-cultural webs influencing the lives of the individuals in his writings. Patriarchy has left indelible imprints in many societies since times immemorial. Men have enjoyed all the privileges over women. Subjugation and subordination of women have remained the most common and widely accepted features of such societies. The women attempted well to stand and prove themselves as good companions under such socio-cultural milieus but whenever the men started turning dominating ones, the resistance was bound to happen. This paper aims at the analysis of the depiction of women in a male chauvinistic society in late nineteenth Century Norway in *A Doll's House*. This paper also analyzes the hegemonic relationship of a woman being a wife with her spouse, with other men-women in society, her husband's perceptions about her, her selfless attitude, her psychological agony and sacrificial nature.

**Keywords:** Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, emancipation, subjugation, subordination, resistance, socio-cultural milieu, hegemonic, male-chauvinistic society, psychological agony.

In his *A Doll's House* (1879), Henrik Ibsen projects enthusiastic Nora while preparing for Christmas and her experiences thereafter. Nora's experiences with her husband, Torvald Helmer and with the couple's friends form the plot of this play. The action of the play in three Acts takes place at Mr Torvald Helmer's house. Undergoing through the financial crisis, Mr Helmer suggests Nora carving extravagance. Over time, ideological differences start developing into clashes between them. Although Nora attempts well to let him feel relaxed from the financial context, she desires to treasure the festive moments as benchmarks had been set during the last

Christmas. Once Mr Helmer had fallen sick, he had to be taken for treatment to Italy, but the couple had no money. In this scenario, she had not considered it appropriate to borrow money from someone else hurting her husband's dignity, so she managed money from the bank by doing her father's signature illegally. Mr Krogstad is the only person who knows this act of forgery and has kept the records of her forgery. Mr Krogstad is a bank employee where Mr Helmer works as a lawyer. Once, Mr Helmer warns Mr Krogstad to fire him from his job, the latter starts blackmailing Nora for her act of forgery. After knowing his wife's act, his ego gets hurt and turns angry worrying about the social grace and reputation. Besides these, Helmer's friend Dr Rank, Nora's old friend Mrs Linde contribute to the plot.

For emancipating the status of women in a family and largely in society, female writers started expressing their anxiety regarding the role of a woman in society from the late eighteenth century, although after the 1960s it took the form of a movement. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) responds to the educational and political theorists of the eighteenth century like Milton, Pope, and Rousseau who believed that women should not obtain a rational education. Here, Wollstonecraft argues that women are also human beings and deserve the same educational as well as other rights like men, and treating them as mere property or ornament for men is against the moral foundation of the society (Nayar 85). Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour* (1911), and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) vividly portray the unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage, and motherhood, and a section of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) projects the depiction of women in D. H. Lawrence's novels. However, some male writers seeking reformation in the status of women express their voices which include Stuart Mill's essay "The Subjugation of Women" (1869) and Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of Family* (1884) (Barry 116). Pramod K. Nayar writes, "Feminist theory argues that the representation of women as weak, docile, innocent, seductive or irrational-sentimental is rooted in and influences actual social conditions, where she does not have power, is treated as a sex-object or a procreating machine, has fewer political and financial rights and is abused" (83). Whereas M.H. Abrams writes, that much of the feminist literary criticism that continues in our time has been interrelated with the movement by political feminists for social, legal, cultural freedom and equality (124).

The playwright showcases that how the traditional gender roles drive the lives of couples in society. With the opening of the play, Nora enters the hall humming a tune in high spirits with several parcels, a Christmas tree, and a basket. After sensing her presence, Helmer calls out from his room:

HELMER. When did my squirrel come home?

NORA. Just now. (Puts the bag of macaroons into her pocket and wipes her mouth.)  
Come in here, Torvald, and see what I have bought.

HELMER. Don't disturb me. (A little later, he opens the door and looks into the room,  
pen in hand.) Bought, did you say? All these things? Has my little spendthrift wasting  
money again?

NORA. Yes, but, Torvald, this year we really can let ourselves go a little. This is the first  
Christmas that we have not needed to economize.

HELMER. Still, you know, we can't spend money recklessly.

NORA. Yes, Torvald, we may be a wee bit more reckless now, mayn't we? Just a tiny  
wee bit! You are going to have a big salary and earn lots and lots of money. (8)

As Helmer had anticipated Nora's intentions regarding the festive shopping, he reminds her about their crucial economic condition, but Nora imposes the honour and respect of being the bread-runner of the family on him. When he expresses his wish not to have any debt or borrowing as it curtails the freedom of life, she articulates her wish to treasure the festive moments. He says to Nora, "You always find some new way of wheedling money out of me" (11)

The playwright highlights the helplessness of women which compels them to make compromises to save the dignity and life of their life partners from their perspective through the character of Nora. Nora's past action torments her throughout the play as Mr Krogstad, a bank employee starts blackmailing her for favours in return:

KROGSTAD. When your husband was ill, you came to me to borrow two hundred and  
fifty pounds.

NORA. I didn't know anyone else to go to.

KROGSTAD. I promised to get you that amount-

NORA. Yes, and you did so.

KROGSTAD. I promised to get you that amount, on certain conditions. Your mind was  
so taken up with your husband's illness, and you were so anxious to get the money  
for your journey, that you seem to have paid no attention to the conditions of our  
bargain. Therefore it will not be amiss if I remind you of them. Now, I promised to  
get the money on the security of a bond which I drew up.

NORA. Yes, and which I signed. (37-38)

As Mr Krogstad had caught the discrepancy in signing the bond to borrow the amount from the Bank and when he asks for confirmation, Nora responds, "Papa died on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September" (39). He interrogates her that how her father can sign the paper after three days of

his death i.e. 2<sup>nd</sup> of October. Finally, she confesses that she had done her father's signature, as she had no other way. She says that at that time her father was extremely ill, if she had asked for the signature, she would have to tell the reason, "when he was so ill himself I couldn't tell him that my husband's life was in danger-it was impossible" (40). Whatever Nora did listening to the voice of her conscious is morally correct as she attempts to strike a balance between the two one who has given her life and the second who is her life now. She wished to save the lives of both, but legally it becomes a crime of forgery that might bring disgrace to the reputation of her husband especially. After gathering a lot of courage, she speaks to her husband "you must let Krogstad keep his post in the bank" (54) which invites reprimands in return from her husband.

After Krogstad gets fired from the job, again visits Nora and warns:

KROGSTAD. You know, I suppose, that I have got my dismissal.

NORA. I couldn't prevent it, Mr Krogstad. I fought as hard as I could on your side, but it was no good.

KROGSTAD. Does your husband love you so little, then? He knows what I can expose you to, and yet he ventures-

NORA. How can you suppose that he has any knowledge of the sort?

KROGSTAD. I didn't suppose so at all. It would not be the least like our dear Torvald Helmer to show so much courage-

NORA. Mr Krogstad, a little respect for my husband, please. (67)

At any cost, Nora wishes to save the reputation and esteem of her husband but, all her attempts in this respect, either to convince her husband or pacify Mr Krogstad turn in vain.

Thereafter, the playwright displays that how a woman remains ready to do anything that pleases her husband in a male chauvinistic society where the roles of both men as well as women are determined by the socio-cultural constructions. Nora's preparations present a picture in this respect when she has dialogue with Mrs Linde:

NORA. Yes, I was passing by. As a matter of fact, it is something you could help me with. Let us sit down on the sofa. Look here. Tomorrow evening there is to be a fancy-dress ball at the Stenborgs', who live above us; and Torvald wants me to go as a Neapolitan fisher-girl, and dance the Tarantella that I learnt at Capri.

MRS. LINDE. I see, you are going to keep up the character.

NORA. Yes, Torvald wants me to. Look, here is the dress; Torvald had it made for me there, but now it is all so torn, and I haven't any idea-

MRS. LINDE. We will easily put that right. It is only some of the trimming come unsewn here and there. Needle and thread? Now then, that's all we want.

NORA. It is so nice of you. (49-50)

Not only Nora as a wife turns passionate to fulfill the wish of her husband, Helmer, but Mrs Linde being an offshoot of a patriarchal society understands her role and also assists Nora in her pursuit of preparation for the ball with equal passion.

The reactions of Mr Helmer, after he reads the letter revealing Nora's act of forgery exemplifies the typical patriarchal mindset as his unconscious completely gets manifested. He starts blaming her in a single breath:

HELMER. (walking about the room) 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! (Nora is silent and looks steadily at him. He stops in front of her) I ought to have suspected that something of the sort would happen. I ought to have foreseen it. All your father's want of has come out in you. No religion, no morality, no sense of duty-How I am punished for having winked at what he did! I did it for your sake, and this is how you repay me.

NORA. Yes, that's just.

HELMER. Now you have destroyed all my happiness. You have ruined all my future. It is horrible to think of! I am in the power of an unscrupulous man; he can do what he likes with me, ask anything he likes of me, give me any order he pleases-I dare not refuse. And I must sink to such miserable depths because of a thoughtless woman! (97)

Once Nora confesses her act of forgery, Mr Helmer gets lost in a monologue that reflects his extreme selfish nature. Helmer's upbringing does not allow him to associate himself with his life partner who has sacrificed her self-esteem for his survival and after this revelation, he starts cursing her, humiliates her by cursing her father too. He even does not attempt to think from Nora's point of view and turns completely indifferent to her. Calling her immoral is ironic as vividly her act of forgery is the most moral and ethical one because it is only her ethics that prevent her from letting her unwell father know about the necessity of such an amount as it might have tensed her father on the one hand whereas, on the other, she considers the prestige of her husband of higher significance as she does not borrow from anyone else that might have brought shame and humiliation to him.

The past of Mrs Linde reveals that she had to sacrifice her love for the sake of her family responsibilities as her mother was bedridden and her two little brothers needed her, so she left her lover, Mr Krogstad for a comparatively wealthy person. After the death of her husband, and mother when her brothers have grown up and can survive without her, she expresses her wish to

reestablish her life with Mr Krogstad, “I want to be a mother to someone, and your children need a mother. We two need each-other. Nils, I have faith in your real character- I can dare anything together with you” (82). Here, one sees that a woman like Mrs Linde suppressing her wishes desires and dreams amidst a larger heap of responsibilities. She loves someone and is compelled to marry someone to bring out her parental family from the financial crisis. She does not leave her bedridden mother and her little brothers in the hours of need rather takes proper care of them in both ways financially by marrying a rich man and emotionally too. When she is not needed by her brothers, she desires to settle down with her former lover Mr Krogstad who is a widower now.

The playwright conveys that resistance is bound to happen in the form of repercussions of the suppressed morality, ethics, and biased socio-cultural constructions. After experiencing the obnoxious and blaming tone of her husband’s language, Nora makes up her mind to leave him and liberate herself. Although when Helmer comes to know that under the influence of Mrs Linde, Mr Krogstad has changed his mind and does not wish to bring any harm as intended earlier by sending the bond back, he starts apologizing before Nora but as she has seen him in the real colour, does not wish to change her mind. The playwright writes:

NORA. Listen, Torvald. I have heard that when a wife deserts her husband’s house, as I am doing now, he is legally freed from all obligations towards her. In any case, I set you free from all your obligations. You are not to feel yourself bound in the slightest way, any more than I shall. There must be perfect freedom on both sides. See, here is your ring back. Give me mine. (110-111)

Thereafter, the playwright emphasizes that how a woman is considered inferior to a man in a male chauvinistic society. He questions the subordination and subjugation of a woman through the experiences of Nora. She says that when she was at home her papa told all his opinions to her so that she can have the same opinions. If sometimes she differed, her papa used to dislike it and would often say that she is his doll-child. She adds that after marriage:

I was simply transferred from Papa’s hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste, so I got the same tastes as you...When I look back on it, it seems to me as if I had been living here like a poor woman-just from hand to mouth. I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so. You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life. (103)



Nora blames the hegemonic patriarchal structure of the society that imposes its ideology on women by restricting women to articulate their voice, by suppressing their individualism. A woman is just to please the men in her life like father, husband, and son. It is the male chauvinistic society that assigns her roles to be played. No one asks her for her likes and dislikes even the most significant decisions of her life are taken by the males of the family. The play ridicules the marginalization of women in Norwegian society.

The above analysis reveals that the hegemonic patriarchal socio-cultural structures play a significant role in shaping the mentality and behaviour of the men/women in Norwegian society. It shapes the men as dominating, oppressive ones, decision-makers of their as well as of the family including the women whereas the woman is supposed to behave submissively without resisting to the decisions of the men in the family and the society largely. The woman is supposed to perform the prescribed roles by the dominating male chauvinistic set up. A good woman is supposed to act as per the wishes of her father, husband, and son. Besides her reproductive role, the woman has to take care of the upbringing of the children whereas the honour of earning the bread of the family is associated with the man. The pivotal character, Nora does her best to please her husband, leaves no stone unturned for the happiness and strengthening of the family relationships. It is her selfless love for her husband and father that pushes her into the act of forgery and even after being blackmailed, she does never wish to bring disgrace to her husband's male ego.

The thankless, abusive, blaming, and humiliating reactions of Helmer, after the revelation of Nora's act of forgery, result in the change of her attitude and perceptions. Overcoming her apprehensive nature, she turns resistant and articulates her suppressed self. Excessive oppression of the woman results in the self-expression of the woman. Therefore, leads to the emancipation of the woman from the shackles of the male chauvinistic society. Through this play, the playwright expresses his radical voices for the equal and humanitarian treatment of females by hinting at the necessity of changing perceptions regarding women in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Norway.

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