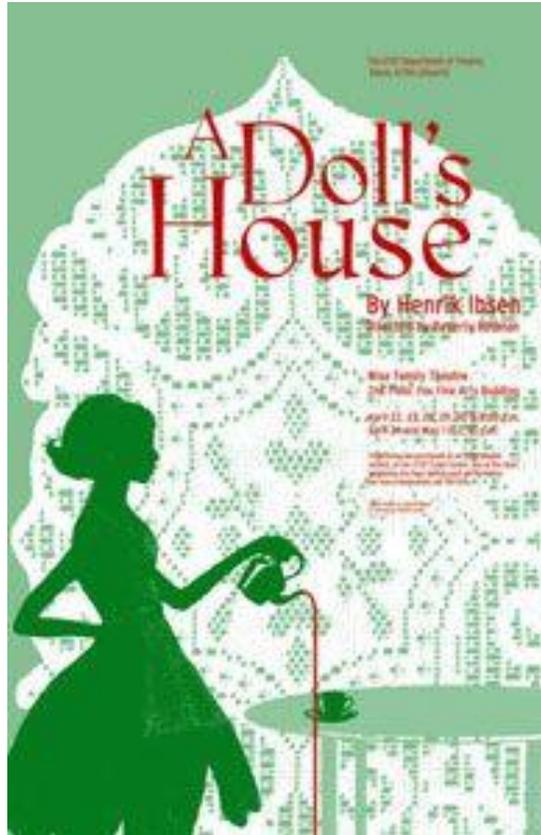


A Doll's House as a Feminist Play

Ishfaq Hussain Bhat



Abstract

Henrik Johan Ibsen (1828-1906) is beyond doubt a major 19th-century playwright. Ibsen is the most frequently performed dramatist in the world after Shakespeare. His best play *A Doll's House* (1879) earned him international acclaim and acceptance as the first major innovative dramatist in the history of English literature. *A Doll's House* is a representative feminist play. It deals primarily with the desire of a woman to establish her identity and dignity in the society governed by men. The play portrays the disillusionment of a wife about how she has been dominated and how her basic right—her right to be someone—has ruthlessly been destroyed in the name of love by her husband.¹ The paper aims to analyze *A Doll's House* from the feminist

perspective whereby Nora, the protagonist, effectively subverts the ingrained elements of patriarchy, privileging female will, choice and strength.

Keywords: Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House* patriarchy, disillusionment, revolt, self-worth, emancipation.

Feminism as a Movement

Feminism is a movement which tries to define and establish social, legal and cultural freedom and equality of women. It advocates women's rights on the ground of equality of sexes in all spheres of life. Feminism, as a literary movement, aims to revolt against the patriarchal society which associates superiority, action, strength, self-assertion and domination with the 'masculine; and on the contrary, inferiority, passivity, weakness, obedience and self-negation with the 'feminine' or the 'Other'. By depicting the miseries of the women in their works, the feminist writers highlight and condemn the plight of women in the patriarchal society and thereby try to inculcate in them a sense of rebellion, self-assertion, self-identity and self-worth. Jessica Valenti aptly defines feminism in the following terms: "Feminism isn't simply about being a woman in a position of power. It's battling systematic inequities; it's a social justice movement that believes sexism, racism and classism exist and interconnect, and that they should be consistently challenged."²

A Representative Feminist Play

A Doll's House is a representative feminist play. The title of the play on one hand symbolizes curtailment on the freedom of a woman and on the other hand it suggests that women are treated as dolls in the patriarchal society. The play is a critique of patriarchal prejudices and discriminations. 'It portrays women's status in the society and their treatment by men: the lack of true love and respect for a wife by a husband and the lack of justice and dignity in the treatment of women in the patriarchal society. *A Doll's House* concerns a woman's rights to individual freedom and the ways in which marriage in a patriarchal society thwarts the individuality of a woman who has all the potentials that her husband has.'³

“Ibsen’s Nora is not just a woman arguing for female liberation; she is much more. She embodies the comedy as well as the tragedy of modern life.” (Tempelton, 28)

Focus on Conjugal Relationship

A Doll’s House is a play about the conjugal relationship of Nora Helmer and Torvald Helmer. Until the end of the play, Nora is presented as a dutiful wife, who caters to her husband’s every need and performs all the roles assigned to her by the patriarchal society. She loves her husband and does everything to please him. The following statement of Nora on one hand shows her love for her husband and on the other hand it symbolizes her submissiveness:

“I am free from care now...to be able to play and romp with the children; To be able to keep the house beautifully and have everything just as Torvald likes it!” (Ibsen, 32)

Nora’s love and respect for her husband, Torvald, becomes evident when she warns Krogstad not to say anything against him:

“If you speak slightingly of my husband, I shall turn you out of my house.” (Ibsen, 50)

Nora

Henrik Ibsen’s feminist posture in the play gets manifested through the character of Nora. Ibsen artistically portrays the miseries of a woman, chained to her husband’s house whereby her freedom is curtailed:

“...And, think of it, soon the spring will come and the big blue sky! Perhaps we shall be able to take a little trip – perhaps I shall see the sea again! Oh, it’s a wonderful thing to be alive and be happy.” (Ibsen, 32)

Nora’s longing, here, symbolizes the longing of all women for identity and freedom. Ibsen also satirizes the absurd patriarchal ideology whereby a woman is treated as an

insignificant sexual object. The following utterance of Nora shows her love for her husband but at the same time it implies how she is treated as a “doll-wife” by him:

“There is no one who has such taste as you. And I do so want to look nice at the fancy-dress ball. Torvald, couldn’t you take me in hand and decide what I shall go as, as what sort of a dress I shall wear?” (Ibsen, 63)

“*A Doll’s House*’s... theme is the need of every individual to find out what kind of a person he or she really is and strive to become that person.” (Meyer, 446)

Devoid of Freedom

In this play, Ibsen also shows how women have been devoid of freedom and self-identity and thus made dependent on the male members of their families in the patriarchal society:

“Torvald, I can’t get along a bit without your help.” (Ibsen,64)

Torvald’s use of anti-feminist language can also be read from the feminist perspective. He uses animal terms to refer to Nora, such as ‘skylark,’ ‘ squirrel,’ and ‘ singing bird’ which suggests that he does not love her as an equal, and treats her like a pet:

“Come, come, my little skylark must not droop her wings. What is this! Is my little squirrel out of temper?” (Ibsen, 6)

Economic Dependence

Another concern of feminism is the economic dependence of women on the dominant male members of the society:

Nora: “Well, then I have found other ways of earning money...it was a tremendous pleasure to sit there working and earning money. It was like being a man.” (Ibsen, 30)

This implies the longing of a woman for freedom from her domesticity.

When Krogstad threatens to disclose to her husband the secret of lending two hundred and fifty pounds to her, she shows her confidence in her husband:

“If my husband does get to know of it, of course he will at once pay you what is still owing; and we shall have nothing more to do with you.” (Ibsen, 52)

Torvald assures her in the second Act of the play that he will withstand any trouble from Krogstad and that he will take everything upon himself:

“Come what will, you may be sure I shall have both courage and strength if they be needed. You will see I am man enough to take everything upon myself.” (Ibsen, 86)

In another scene Torvald says: “ My darling wife...Do you know, Nora, I have often wished that you might be threatened by some great danger, so that I might risk my life’s blood, and everything, for your sake.” (Ibsen, 148) Nora being naïve believes it to be true: “He was capable of doing it. He will do it. He will do it in spite of everything.” (Ibsen, 87)

However all this proves to be a lie. When Torvald eventually comes to know that Nora had borrowed money from Krogstad and had forged her father’s signature, he without giving her a chance to explain the entire case, begins to scold her in strong terms calling her a hypocrite, a liar, and a criminal:

“What a horrible awakening! All these eight years- she who was my joy my pride- a hypocrite, a liar- worse, worse,- a criminal...And I must sink to such miserable depths because of a thoughtless woman!” (Ibsen, 150-51)

Astounded by Her Husband’s Indifferent Attitude

Nora, who had thought that in case Torvald comes to know about the loan that she had taken to save his life, he would take the entire guilt on his shoulders, is astounded by her husband’s indifferent attitude. She had thought that he was capable of making any conceivable sacrifice for her sake, he proves to be a self-centered man who far from trying to protect her at this time of crisis, is reprimanding her and accusing her of a complete want of a sense of responsibility and of morality:

“All your father’s want of principle has come out in you. No religion, no morality, no sense of duty.” (Ibsen, 151)

Completely Disillusioned

Thus Nora is completely disillusioned with her husband. She is now a changed woman. A light has dawned upon her mind. She takes off her fancy dress which symbolizes her revolt against the patriarchal society. In a typical feminist and authoritative tone she says:

“No, that is just it. You don’t understand me and I have never understood you either...You must not interrupt me. You must simply listen to what I say.” (Ibsen, 157)

Nora is no longer prepared to be his “doll-wife”. As a feminist, she complains about the treatment she has got from her father and her husband who have always treated her as a doll and not as a human being having an identity of her own:

“I have been greatly wronged, Torvald- first by papa and then by you...When I was at home with papa, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed from him I concealed the fact, because he would not have liked it. He called me his doll-child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls. And then I came to live with you...I was simply transferred from papa’s hand into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste, and so I got the same tastes as yours...When I look back on it, it seems to me as if I had been living here like as a poor woman- just from hand to mouth...You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life...Our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa’s doll-child.” (Ibsen, 158-160)

Treated as Dolls

This shows how women are treated in a male dominated society: they are treated as dolls as if they do not have any life, choice, will, identity of their own. Thus she expresses the deep repugnance that she feels for the patriarchal society which makes the life of women miserable.

And when Helmer Torvald says: “From the future it shall be different. Playtime shall be over, and lesson-time shall begin.” (Ibsen, 160) Her response is essentially feminist:

“You are not the man to educate me into being a proper wife for you.” (Ibsen, 160) “... I must try and educate myself.” (Ibsen, 161) “... and that is why I am going to leave you now.” (Ibsen, 161)

Assertion: Feminist Strain

And Nora’s response when Helmer tries to be authoritative as he has been throughout his life is another example of her feminist strain. She, here, asserts and ascertains her freedom as she no longer wants to be a prisoner of the patriarchal society:

Helmer: “You are out of your mind! I won’t allow it! I forbid you!” (Ibsen, 161)

Nora: “It is no use forbidding me anything any longer. I will take with me what belongs to myself. I will take nothing from you, either now or later.” (Ibsen, 160-61)

She is no longer prepared to submit blindly to the conventions of society. She finally discovers that her most sacred duty is not to her husband or to her children, but to herself. Helmer repeatedly tries to win her over but to no avail:

Helmer: “Before all else, you are a wife and a mother.” (Ibsen, 162)

Nora: “I don’t believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are.” (Ibsen, 163)

She goes on to manifest her feminist posture by revolting against the patriarchal society. She even highlights and condemns the patriarchal bias found in books/literature and revolts against the absurd patriarchal distinctions whereby creative/mental faculty is associated with ‘masculine’:

“I know quite well, Torvald, that most people would think you right, that views of that kind are to be found in books; but I can no longer contend 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.” (Ibsen, 163)

Advocating Gender Equality in All Spheres of Life

Ibsen, here, manifests his feminist posture by advocating gender equality in all spheres of life. Moreover, he subverts the life-long notion about women as weak, submission and irrational. As Nora is completely disillusioned, her love for Torvald drops dead, and she leaves him and also her children:

“Never to see him again. Never! Never! Never to see my children again either – never again...Goodbye, Torvald and my children!” (Ibsen, 149)

As Helmer tries to persuade her not to desert him, she pays no heed to Helmer’s entreaties. She walks out of the doll’s house, slamming the door behind her. The slamming of the door bears paramount significance for the feminist interpretation of the play: It symbolizes Nora’s revolt against the patriarchal prejudices, it also symbolizes turning a deaf ear to the call of domesticity and her decision to rise above the temptation of baser impulses like feelings and affections and thus to open a new door of identity and individuality.⁴

Feminist or Humanist?

Is it only about women? When asked about his intention in the play *A Doll’s House*, Ibsen claimed that the play was not a ‘feminist’ play; he said that it was a ‘humanist’ play. However, his refusal to limit the play’s meaning to being ‘feminist’ does not change the emotional and psychological effect of the play on the audience and the readers: It is a woman’s predicament with which the play deals; it is the disillusionment of a wife that is the subject of the play; it is the drastic step taken by a wife to leave her family with which the play ends; it is the woman in the play who wins our maximum sympathy.⁵ In this play, Nora seeks individuality and autonomous selfhood, which she eventually acquires by breaking the shackles of gender roles of mother and wife. The play, thus, is a representative feminist play replete with feminist ethos.

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