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The Identity In-Between: The Enquiry of Apathy and Existential Anguish in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

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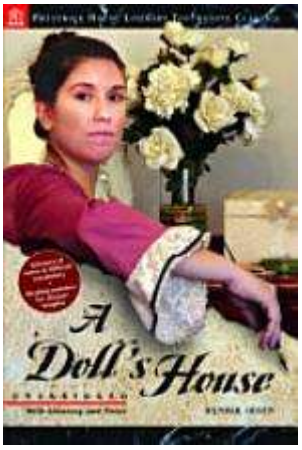

Abstract

Henrik Ibsen, a champion of modern theatre movement, is an ardent advocate of self-freedom, self-emancipation, and self-control. *A Doll's House* is not an exception to this literary tradition as it shelves the contrasts between individuality and social values. Quite interestingly, 'Ibsenite' plays address these troubling issues of contemporary Victorian dualities. The project of European Enlightenment and its subsequent avalanche effects are truly represented through these plays where the classic and modern minds are in duels, fighting each other to the claws without any conclusive, authoritative solutions. Nora, the character representing the

rebellion of the 'New Women', shares this crisis of her identity, a character torn between the traditional values and the urging necessity of the metamorphic transformation. Thus, the slamming of the door echoes the tension between the dualities of mind, an endeavor of self-searching quest. The paper investigates the existential phenomena of the issue examining the traces of metamorphosis and its aftermath.

Key words

enlightenment, identity, existential anguish, metamorphosis, new women, dollydom.

1. Introduction

The development of Western History is identically allied with the project of Enlightenment and its aftermath. The project of European Enlightenment, which has been geared up by this new wave of revolutionary industrial achievements, was quite trapped into a quagmire of debate, degeneration and moral deficiency at the very beginning of the twentieth century. The radical debate of *fin de siècle* (Ledger, 79) is quite contentiously revolving around the tables and the tea cups, as if the civilization is at the very end of its down-end collapse. A significant crack was developing between the traditional values and the new-coined 'ism's. The era of peace, stability and assured intellectuality is shattering into pieces questioning the classical values or clichés of chivalry, heroism, tradition, authority, and control.

The enlightenment, being geared up by the Western Industrial Revolution, now ends up into the age of modernity, the age of self-freedom, self-enlightenment, and self-reliance. Indeed, in existential term, this is an age of 'Das Man' (Coates, 232), the reinvention of human creed, its potentiality and possibilities.

In Ibsenite plays, this reinvention of 'Das Man', the projection of self-freedom and the metamorphic process, is presented in an illustrative way. *A Doll's House* is a telling tale of that transformation, a telling tale of that process of modernization, a quest of new identity, a saga of in-between dualities of 'existential anguish' of a character torn between the values of tradition and modernity, of true self and the illusion.

2. Analysis

2.1 Metamorphosis of a 'New Woman'

The idea of 'New Women' was quite awakening and controversial, even till the date. The European audience, exclusively the Victorian one, is highly moved by the production of this play. The publication as well as the theatrical runs created a loud uproar both among the radicals and the liberals. Indeed, Victorian England was influenced by this great Norwegian playwright. Various translations of the plays, 'twelve' out of 'twenty' plays (Downs, 476), were quite available to the English audience far before the end of the century. Ibsen is either greeted of turned down by the audience with an ardent fervor or sheer abominable horror. Truly, Ibsen's work does possess the moments of truth; a modern-but-picturesque

encapsulation of the crisis of domesticity. In Norwegian context, also, this sense of 'transformation' (Durbach, 4) is quite present among the commoners.

Ibsen's Norway, which has just been freed from Danish rule in 1814, is a nation aspiring with the 'the spirit of bloodless revolution with a democratic constitution and in search of national identity and a national language' (Durbach, 4). In this backdrop, indeed, *A Doll's House* comes forth with its revolutionary, as well as rebellious, idea of slamming the door against the corrupt, filthy, pretentious martial life.

In *A Doll's House*, Nora's metamorphic transfiguration, a loving, empathic mother to an apathetic, a price need to be paid for the emerging identity named 'New Women' (Ledger, 79) is an interesting element of criticism for literary critics. Transformation, or metamorphosis, to term in a better way, is one of the most important themes in Henrik Ibsen's plays.

Ibsen's characters often go through a diametrical transfiguration of self-dispositions. In *A Doll's House*, Nora, the protagonist of this 'problem play', stands as a figure of protest against the patriarchal oppression, symbolically portrayed through the character of Helmer. Ibsen's plays carry on the issue of father, fatherhood and patriarchy (Lorentzen, 817). In the case of Nora too, issue of patriarchy or its symbolic oppression is expressed quite expressively throughout the play. Shideler, as cited in Lorentzen, does also point towards the significance of the issue of fatherhood and patriarchy as he suggests Ibsenite plays, exclusively *Pillars of Society* (1877), *A Doll's House* (1879), and *Ghosts* (1881), quite expressively represents the 'struggle between the patriarch-oriented men and the biocentric-oriented women who argue in favor of a new social order through references to a new knowledge-base founded on human freedom and equality' (818).

Quite evidently, Nora's struggle ends up in a symbolic protest of estrangement, a process of alienation, an inward transformation of self-inclinations. In Act 1, audience, quite happily, finds an emphatic mother, someone who cares about her children, who cares about her family, who cares her children's father. At the end, the same character, in a sheer frenzy horror to the spectators, transforms into an apathetic one, someone who can dare to denounce everything she had on the way to her self-freedom and self-control. Joan Templeton comments, ''She is denounced as an irrational and frivolous narcissist; an "abnormal woman'', a "hysteric"; a vain, unloving egoist who abandons her family in a paroxysm of selfishness' (29).

Such a transformation of the self is not something of an ordinary, something of an everyday affair. Instead, it's a complete and complex metamorphosis of the self, metamorphosis of the individuality. It will be quite unjust to portray the character of Nora exclusively in this way as it also undermines the metamorphic traces of the character, the discovery of one's own true self and its consequentiality. Indeed, the sheer horror it produces is only comparable to blood-booth avenging tragedy of Euripides' *Medea*. In fact, Nora's metamorphosis, in this case, symbolizes, 'the plea for woman as a human being, neither more nor less than man' (Templeton, 32). This transformation or metamorphosis of staunch individuality is a distinct mark of the then societal turmoil, the urge of individuality, of self searching quest, of making the identity of someone's own.

2.2 Nora and Christina: Resurrection of a 'New Women'

Nora's foil, Christina, is a nice example of Nora's transformation into 'New Woman'. In fact, Errol Durbach, in ''A Doll's House: Ibsen's Myth of Transformation'', rightly observes the play is quite intricately woven with 'parallelism's (74). The characters are often playing the role-reversals of their counterparts, and it is quite interesting to know how the transformation takes place into reality in that way. In Act 1, as an example, Nora is childish, romantic, highly emotive and impractical. On the contrary, Christina, in the beginning of the play, is practical, disillusioned and rational.

These two characters are quite in opposition to each other, as if a diametrical reflection of the self in the mirror. Nora is always obedient and loyal to her husband. Her pretensions, her dishonesty regarding the forgery of the documents, her self-deceit and her delusive belief that a miracle can truly happen – all these are apparent manifestations of her characteristic inconsistency and drawback. Christina, being alarmed with all these childish, doll-like demeanors, suggests: 'Nora, Nora, have you still not grown up? You are still an extravagant thing at school' (Ibsen, 16). Quite interestingly, Nora is quite happy with the role she is playing with, the role of a 'doll-wife' (Ibsen, 82).

It's a pretension of happiness and fulfillment, whereas her identity, her true self is captive to the cage of an autocratic husband. As if she is really the little 'skylark', a metaphorical manifestation of her psychological captivity. Contrarily, Christina is quite rational, someone who has went through many things of life, have seen many faces of human race, have went through necessary torment to be a self-inclined and a self-searching individual. She is pale, thin and quite old, has no family, and she is all alone in this cruel world to live for, to fight for, and to strive for something better in this world. Her loneliness is quite frightening to an all-go-fancy character like Nora. She comments, 'So utterly alone! How dreadful that must be!'(Ibsen, 38).

This is quite ironic (and keeping that irony in our mind) that Nora's metamorphosis turns out to be quite similar to Christina's at the end of the play. Christina begins to play the role of Nora, and Nora of Christina. Christina enters into a family life leaving the experience of her dead husband and the unhappy past with an optimism to be happy with Krogstad. On the contrary, Nora enters into the role of Christina. Although Helmer is quite alive as well as the little children, it seems quite extraordinary that she takes up the role of Christina slamming the door of a husband who is nothing but a dead man to the reality of her own. Ironically, Christina urges, 'What a change! What a change! To have someone to work for, to live for; a home to make happy!' (Ibsen, 88).

Christina's character transfigures form indifference to sympathy. Contrarily, Nora's character gets a change from empathy to apathy. Christina has no issue, Nora has. Still, it brings no considerable effect to such a development. Nora is shocked with an unimaginable jolt finding the void, finding the hollow hole to her imagined identity. Alike a 'doll-wife' (Ibsen, 102), she plays her given role. However, the emerging stony face of reality belittles all her dreamy miracles. Nora, indeed, wanted to get rid of all these 'moral lepers' (Durbach, 75).

However, does this mean it's the end of the transformation. In fact, the answer is a big 'no'. The play itself possesses the mirror reflection of Nora's beyond-the-downfall initiative. It's none other than Krogstad, the most villainous character of the play. Krogstad's capacity for 'change and moral recovery', as Durbach claims, is the 'most significant mirror image of Nora's metamorphosis of spirit' (85). Thus, Nora's estrangement is a demise of a loving mother –metamorphosed – but a necessity that she cannot ignore. As Durbach rightly claims:

> Mrs. Linde offers Krogstad not sacrifice, but alliance: a life of mutual support, a joining of forces in which individual need is not subordinated to social or sexual expectations, and where strength derives from channeling energy and work into a common enterprise. In a startling reversal of traditional roles, she proposes to him, not marriage in a doll's house state of dependency, but a form of ''samhuet'': a ''living together'' in a reciprocity of equally balanced interests. (85-86)

Indeed, the metamorphosis of Nora's dispositions project further expectations from her character. In fact, Nora's transformation foreshadows the desired quest of a new identity, an identity founded on the stones of self-rule and individuality. Such a metamorphic trace, quite evidently, entails another shared life, quite like Christina and Krogstad, a home not built on pretensions and deceit, but on the rocks of reason and respect.

2.3 The Question of 'Existential Anguish'

The issue of metamorphosis, an essentiality to Nora's situation, can now be discussed with the question of existential 'anguish'. How can we be sure that Nora really suffers the anguish of a true existentialist?

As we know of Ibsen, his plays are quite intricately woven with complex issues of the then society. In a Norwegian pre-modern context, the society he lives in is quite an 'in-between' state, a newly independent state with all its dualities of tradition and new values. It's nothing strange that Ibsen does share the same feeling of urgency of 'authenticity' quite like Søren Kierkegaard, the champion of Christian Existentialism.

Kierkegaard's ''Attack upon Christendom'' (Nordmeyer, 592) is quite inspiringly similar to the task Ibsen has taken all the way. As this Danish Christian Existentialist keeps questioning the authenticity of contemporary pretensions, the clichés of sin and salvation, the suppression of self-enlightenment; similarly, Ibsen also questions the 'pillars of society' (ibid.), the customs, institutions, or habituations of our day-to-day affairs with an authentic perspective of self-criticism.

As a character of its kind, Nora also shows the signs of this self-criticism, the urge of an authentic, valid existence. Errol Durbach acknowledges this existential blend to this situation of metamorphosis as a perpetuation of 'sjæleliv', in Danish the 'spiritual process', a continued journey of 'mind, soul, psyche and spirit' (Durbach, 5). In reality, Nora, at that moment of crisis, is also manifesting this existential blend through her process of self-searching quest, a

self-discovery of a 'romantic definition of mankind' to the blend of 'existential' with a succinct 'modern amalgam' (Durbach, 5).

Now, existentialism, in its own right, is a down-to-earth realization of human life with all its prime focus to human, humanity and human existence. As Jean Paul Sartre rightly says, the most certain thing a human can be is his/her 'individuality' (25), the 'self', the 'human', 'Das Man'. This 'subjectivity' brings in, quite naturally, the trace of 'anguish'. As Nordmeyer rightly defines, an existentialist is burnt with a 'self-revealed inexorable duty', a sense of duty to be cautious of 'our responsibility in the immediacy of each other and every moment' (586). This self-duty, the urge for search the true identity, true responsibility to self, brings in the 'state of sub-conscious tension', an 'angest' 'fear' 'agonisse', 'the fear of nothingness', 'of senselessness', 'of absurd chaos' (ibid.).

Existentialism, thus, puts forth the self before the essence, in an existentialist's 'vorite maxim' – ''existence precedes essence''(Killinger, 304).

In this way, every human existence, intentionally or unintentionally, possess this disposition of subjectivity, leading the person to his own way to self-thought, individual choice, and subjective perspective. In fact, such a doctrine inspires human beings to think about life and existence quite seriously, rather than casually. Existentialism, in reality, suggests the action, the action of making the right choice. It suggests every human existence is bound to make the choice. It appreciates the fact that there is a 'responsibility' (Killinger, 305), a dire responsibility to enjoy the 'dreadful freedom' of human existence; and this freedom comes through the 'suffering', something hardly appealing to an everyday commoner. Someone, who righteously picks the choice between the 'slavery' of ignorance and 'freedom of choice', is the successful one, the real 'individual', the man. This approach to life and existence, as Sartre claims, is all about 'action' (cited in Adler, 287), it's a kind of 'valuation of what the human does in a situation, how he makes the choice' (ibid.).

In Nora's case, we can trace similar situations an existentialist character will face. Ibsenite plays, as we have mentioned earlier, is constructed on the idea of self-determinism. Ibsen, also vocally, expressed his idea on French Revolution of 1789:

> Liberty, equality, and fraternity are no longer the things they were in the days of the late-lamented guillotine. This is what the politicians will not understand, and therefore I hate them. They want only their own special revolutions, revolutions in externals, in politics, etc. But all this is mere trifling. What is all-important is the revolution of the spirit of man (qtd in Neserius, 31).

Indeed, this 'spirit of man' is quite strikingly similar with the existential term of 'individual'. As a 'moralist' (Brades, 49), Ibsen shares the platform quite well with the existentialist. It may seem that he is a 'pessimist' (Brades, 53), but, in reality, he is well ahead of a pessimist, rather a staunch moralist who wants to 'unmask' the faces, the unmasking of 'self-delusion and baseness' (ibid.). This 'spirit of man' is quite in line with the spirit of individuality, of a

self-searching quest, an epic journey of 'know thy self', a conquest to the realm of rational worldly world.

In the case of Nora, it happens quite expressively. Her transfiguration is a gradual development of a romantic girl who feels the practical reality of patriarchal society and tunes herself with the existential necessity of defiance of its oppression. Sartre, in ''Existentialism and Humanism'', suggests 'you are nothing else but what you live' (38) and 'choosing for himself he chooses for all men' (25). In this case, Nora chooses to be free from pretensions and deceit, from control and manipulation, from loss of identity and oblivion. In fact, she is self-searching the choice to individual, choice to make oneself free as 'man is free, man is freedom' (Sartre, 30). In doing so, Nora is not destructing the values like the institution of marriage, as it is oftentimes criticized, instead she is de/re-constructing, in all its positive tones. Indeed, Ibsen's plays often criticize any superstitious way of living.

Rudolph Binion suggests Ibsen's plays do foreshadow the ruination of an institution like marriage when it is nothing but a pretension. In *Wild Duck* (1897), for example, the symbolism of Duck as a domesticated humanity is quite metaphorically mocked (Binion, 679). As if the domestication is a kind of captivity, a kind of un-natural state of human race, and a mere deviation from universal way of living. In the case of Nora, as we see, this can be strikingly similar as the theme of 'captivity', the very idea of coverture (Kelly, 16), is well present with the symbolic expressions like 'my little skylark', 'squirrel' etc. Nora, as if, is a sub-human being, something to be caged in, some sort of showpiece to be showcased in the elegant, luxurious drawing-room.

In this context, the rebellion, which quite naturally follows at the end of the play, can't be misunderstood simply as a ruination of the entire social setting. Nora, here, acts quite like a bonafide existentialist who seeks the meaning being truthful to her own existence and the necessity to exist. Thus, when we consider the graphical development of Nora's metamorphosis, we find a set of choices open to Nora, as well as the room for 'abandonment' (Sartre, 28). Nora could have continued her pretensions in intellectual captivity. She could have pardoned the hypocrisy of Helmer. She could have left the home with or without the children. At the least, she could have ignored Helmer. These are the choices she could have made, and, as an individual, she has picked the most extreme one. In a balance, she has her family; on the contrary, she has her freedom and self-enlightenment. Nora had nothing to do but to choose only one option and the obvious catastrophe of this choice is the collapse of all others, the abandonment. Clement Scott, a sharp critic of Ibsen's new women, criticizes, 'A cat or dog would tear anyone who separated it from its offspring, but the socialistic Nora, the apostle of new creed of humanity, leaves her children almost without a pang. She has determined to leave her home … it's all self, self, self! This is the ideal woman of new creed' (19). In this case, such a criticism is valid but unjust if we overlook the 'existential crisis' she has went through, the pathways she needs to pave, the sufferings she needs to suffer through. In fact, this is quite despairing that she needs to abandon her children, but this is the essentiality that she is bound to face as a consequence of the societal manipulation of the patriarchy. In doing so, she indeed, enters into 'anguish' (Sartre, 35), an obvious and ultimate fate of making the existential choices like these. Nora, in the way to achieving this freedom, the freedom of self, of intellectuality, of anatomy, and of choices to be made, she needs to pay

the price of the precious gain, the price of 'despair', of 'anguish', of a 'crisis' within. Every human existence, as Sartre suggests, bears such a sense of 'anguish' (27). In Kierkegaard's term, this 'anguish of Abraham' (Sartre, 27) haunts Nora throughout the play until the volcano erupts with an abrupt catastrophic effect. The most magnetic moment of eruption as follows:

> But our house has been nothing but a playroom. Here I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I used to be papa's doll-child. And the children, in their turn have been my dolls. I thought it fun when you played with me, just as the children did when I played with them. That has been our marriage, Torvald. (Ibsen, *A Doll's House,* Act 3, 102)

As she leaves her 'beautiful, happy home' (Ibsen, 44), she needs to abandon the other choices. Thus, Nora needs to justify her protest and she raises her voice being aware of the wrongs done to her, and she decides her own fate taking the projected metamorphosis. Virtually, Nora is nothing less than a hero who should be adored for such an act of bravery. Nora consciously went through a self-changing metamorphosis, a necessity that we can ever ignore, an essentiality that came without any prior preparation, a fateful event that transfigured everything within the character, but for that the most important price she needs to sacrifice is her empathy to her children. Indeed, she has had feelings to her children, as we see how she sobs in Act 3: 'Never to see the children again. Never, never—oh, that black, icy water! Oh, that bottomless—! If it were over!' (Ibsen, 96). She, in fact, has had a thought of suicidal effort in such a fix of crazy betrayal. This, indeed, shows how she cares about her children, and such an emotive tone never qualifies her as an apathetic. However, the essential act of abandonment does portray her, apparently, as an apathetic, someone with a cold heart who can throw away everything that creates obstacle to self-emancipation. In this context, Errol Durbach, quite reasonably, is generous and kind-hearted about Nora and all these allegations of egotism and self-inclinations. She reviews the act quite positively as an existential one, a role which foreshadows as a mirror-role of Christiana. As Durbach comments:

> It would be misleading, however, to regard A Doll's House as a militant blow against the institution of marriage. Read my play carefully, Ibsen might say to his modern feminist celebrants, and you will find a dialectical contradiction at its centre, for Nora's slamming the door on the doll's house must be seen in the dramatic context of Mrs. Linde's motives for reentering that secure domestic revolution is to miss its surprising *tvertimod* . (92)

Indeed, Nora's transformation foreshadows this existential anguish of an 'individual' who is fatally fated to make such a choice between her 'self' and her motherly love.

3. Conclusion

All these arguments follow the conclusion that Nora is not an apathetic. Instead, she is bound to make the choice of her life, a situation so critical and uniquely complex. Her metamorphosis is not only for the sake of self-contentment, as we know she can hardly be

happy being away with her children. Instead, this is all about the choices we make. It's all about the duality of reality and illusion, about the captivity and freedom, about control and emancipation. This is quite a battle between the pretension and the truth. As Coates points out, such a situation is a kind of 'existential affirmation', a kind of valuation of 'authentic human personality' (230). To say more briefly, this is all about, in Kierkegaard's terms, the true 'Individual' (cited in Coates, 230).

The pretension lies with the pretension of being happy with a man who does not know how to love or appreciate the love, who is cowardice and himself is self-inclined, egoistic, and materialistic in perspective. This pretension, which is quite well-fueled by the society she lives, is the fundamental reason she struggles to overcome. She searches for the real individual self, the self she has lost. Unlike Schiller and Goethe, as Neserius suggests, Ibsen does portray this battle of individual and society, between the freedom and tyranny (26). In fact, we cannot ignore the base lines of these thought-provoking cues of the playwright that this is not a single 'monodrama' (Durbach, 133), rather a complex depiction of the battle between the self and the society, between the essentiality of making the choices or refraining, between freedom of human mind or manipulative captivity of the individual. Also, this will be quite unjust and unfair to criticize Nora, as well as the playwright, of selfish egotism or blind individuality, as existentialism is never a 'philosophy of isolation' (Killinger, 312). Soren Kierkegaard, as Killinger cites, puts it more emphatically, 'the whole race has part in the individual, and the individual has part in the whole race' (312).

In conclusion, we can quite reasonably claim that Nora goes through self-transforming metamorphosis from a doll-wife to a certain-individual. She possesses the most precious and important discovery of her identity through the anguished choice between her motherly values and individuality. However, being thrown into a moment of truth, she is pushed to make the choice of her own. The choice, quite dreadfully, leads her to a metamorphic transformation of her 'self', of her intellectuality, and of her identity. She needs to sacrifice as well as suffer. Still, all these never qualify her as an apathetic, cold mother as she is fated to choose in such a fateful way, an essentiality she has suffered through. Instead, she is, truly, an existentialist character, someone who is in search of her authenticity, her true-self, her true identity as an individual of the existing human race.

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