

# The Use of Symbolic Language in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*: A Feministic Perspective

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## Abstract

This paper is a feministic analysis of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in Julia Kristeva's perspective of semiotic and symbolic language. The focus of the paper is to expose the patriarchy and its ruthless exploitation of women. In the light of Kristeva's semiotic / symbolic language modes appropriate sentences, clauses, phrases and lexemes have been specified and marked out to uncover the social status of woman, and to demonstrate that how a woman is reduced to mere a toy or / and a breathing object to a maximum extent, and a socially constructed phenomenon working for man. The paper concludes that patriarchy establishes the ideas of man's ascendancy and woman's relegation on the basis of symbolic concepts associated with male-dominated linguistic code, and not on the basis of semiotic use of language.

**Key Words:** Julia Kristeva, Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, Feminism, Symbolic Language, Semiotic Language, Patriarchy

## Introduction

The paper is a feministic study of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in the light of Kristeva's feministic theory of language. Feminism discusses the injustices against women which "extend into the structure of our society and the contents of our culture and permeates our consciousness" (Barkty, 1990: 63). Kristeva states her opinions through the concepts of semiotic and symbolic modes of language. The semiotic is natural meaning while symbolic, on the other hand, is related to power and dominance; the patriarchal functions in society or culture. Semiotic is pre-oedipal

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phase, inclined to maternal relation and the symbolic is “any social, historical sign system of meaning constitutive of a community of speakers” (Keltner, 2011:19). If a woman identifies with the mother [a female], she guarantees her elimination from the patriarchal order. And in case she identifies with the father [a male], then she ends up backing up the same male-controlled order which marginalizes and relegates her as a woman.

## **Literature Review**

Literary history exposes women’s long and untiring struggle to make them visible and to capsize the patriarchal social order. Kelly is of the view that “one of the most powerful things feminism has done ... is to create new language and meanings which provide women with ways of naming and understanding their own experiences” (Kelly, 1994: 178). Language, the product of society, is an emblem of women’s coercion. The most powerful gender, the man, always imposes his own definitions of the masculinity and femininity. Man considers woman ‘the other’ (Beauvoir, 1949) as the one who is not oneself. “If men are active, women must be passive, if men represent good, women must represent evil ... all the negative characteristics of humanity, as men perceive them, are projected onto women” (Beauvoir, 1949: 23).

Regarding language and its symbolic meanings, Sree writes that “it is difficult for women to express their feelings in a language which is chiefly made by men” (Sree, 2008: 28). So, a language is needed which at best can facilitate the women to break their silence and to express their feelings and ideas. Butler writes: “she [Kristeva] argues that the semiotic potential of language is subversive, and describes the semiotic as a poetic-maternal linguistic practice that disrupts the symbolic, understood as culturally intelligible rule-governed speech” (Butler, 1989: 104).

### ***A Doll’s House***

Much research has been done on *A Doll’s House* since its publication. The feministic studies of the play have reputed its author as a feminist writer. In recent times, a feministic study of the play by Yuehua has exposed the conflicts between the male and female. Yuehua explored the

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ideological elements “to reveal male misconception of women and causes that entail men’s power” (Yuehua, 2009:79). Present paper, however, is an application of Kristeva’s feministic concepts of semiotic and symbolic language to *A Doll’s House*.

## **Research Methodology**

The paper explores the linguistic items of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* in the light of Julia Kristeva’s feministic concept of symbolic and semiotic modes of language. For the analysis of the text, the guiding principles, regarding her concept of symbolic and semiotic modes of language, have been taken from Kristeva’s *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980) and *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984). Kristeva relates semiotic concept with nature and symbolic with cultural or social. According to her, the symbolic notions of patriarchy teach woman to remain silent, to be submissive and subordinate, and to act on the desires of man. The lexemes, phrases, clauses and sentences of this Norwegian drama have been marked out to prove that the symbolic concepts are the main contributing factors in the dehumanization of women.

## **Application of Kristeva’s Feministic Concept of Symbolic Language to *A Doll’s House***

The history of humankind is a testimony to the scuffles women have had to suffer in the process of demanding their rights to freedom and equality in society. From the earliest times the women are kept under male suppression. Women’s yearning to equal social status, access to equal opportunities, and right to expression have encountered stiff resistance over the ages. Regrettably, gender discrimination is rampant in several cultures and societies even today.

*A Doll’s House* was first published in 1879. It deals with the painful lives of the middle-class women in a society ruled by patriarchal laws. The action takes place in the drawing room of Torvald Helmer. From the very first page, we are introduced to Helmer’s wife, Nora. Nora’s first two dialogues are exchanged with the porter who brings the Christmas tree inside the room. Her third dialogue is exchanged with her husband, Torvald Helmer, who calls her from his room: “Is that my little lark twittering out there?” (Ibsen, 2009 : 04). In this sentence three lexemes can be marked to show the symbolic concept of language. ‘My’, ‘little’ and ‘lark’ all connote to the

patriarchal concepts associated with woman. 'My' refers to the sense of possession very much the part and parcel of male gender. Woman is considered a belonging, a possession, a property. Father, brother, husband and then son are her possessors and owners who have an ultimate control of her being. Her own feelings, desires, ideas, notions, opinions are of no value. She has to lead her life according to the framework framed for her by her possessors. A Doll's House is replete with hundreds of such lexemes and phrases where Nora is treated as possession by Torvald Helmer. In the following phrases, clauses and sentences Nora is addressed to as 'my'.

Is it **my little squirrel** bustling about? (04)

When did **my squirrel** come home? (04)

Has **my little** spendthrift been wasting money again? (04)

**My little skylark** must not droop her wings. (05)

Is **my little squirrel** out of temper? (05)

**My dear little** Nora. (06)

You extravagant **little** person! (06)

A sweet **little** spendthrift (07)

**My sweet little skylark** (07)

**My little songbird** (30)

**My little** Nora (31)

**My obstinate little** woman (31)

**My precious little** singing-bird! (32-33)

## Significant Lexemes

In the above mentioned examples from Act I of *A Doll's House*, certain other lexemes are also worth discussion. The lexeme 'little' is used twelve times in these lines. 'Little' refers to something or someone very tiny, diminutive, miniature, and specially the one who can never be self-sufficient and always depends on others for existence. As Kristeva says that the symbolic language is the language of power, associated with patriarchy, such expressions 'My' and 'little' are the preferably adopted lexemes of the male gender. In the above mentioned examples the nouns like 'skylark', 'squirrel', 'songbird', and 'singing-bird' are also worth noticing. For Helmer Nora is not a human being with brain and personality. Rather she is a bird or squirrel, a beautiful and colourful creature meant for male enjoyment and pleasure. The society is a male-dominated society where language is a tool in the hands of the dominating gender, and is utilized fully to create an impression of ruler and be ruled; possessor and possessed, supervisor and subservient.

## Patriarchy and Man's Power

Kristeva is of the view that patriarchy creates the concepts of man's power and woman's otherliness on the basis of symbolic or cultural concept and not the natural ones (Kristeva, 1980; 1984). The play is filled with many phrases and clauses which are the indicators of man's desire of control over woman, and his always-evident wish to be obeyed and submitted to. In the first act of the drama we are informed of Nora's liking for macaroons and Helmer's strict orders against this confectionary item. "Hasn't Miss Sweet Tooth been breaking rules in town today?" (Ibsen, 2010: 07). The sentence shows how there are rules in the Helmer-House, which are formulated by Torvald and must not be broken by Nora, neither at home nor outside of it. She never imagines going against his wishes. As she says, "I should not think of going against your [Torvald] wishes" (07). At another place she says, "as you please, Torvald" (05). Nora in the entire action of drama remains busy in pleasing Torvald. She believes firmly that a happy home is a place where husband is kept pleased. She states, "to be able to keep the house beautifully and have everything just as Torvald likes it" (17) is a height of success. According to the prevalent norms husband is the sole authority without whose consent, nothing is possible. The wife has no

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choice of her own; all must be that may please him. When Nora narrates her past to Mrs. Linde and makes the story of borrowing for Helmer clear, Mrs. Linde says, “a wife cannot borrow without her husband's consent” (14). Such socially constructed thought-patterns are deeply fixed in human conscience and deviation from them is never possible.

### **Object of Pleasure**

Nora is an object of pleasure for Torvald. For him her only one quality is important, the quality of being beautiful and charming with “dear eyes” and “pretty little hands” (08). He does not want her to spoil herself or to damage her appearance. He forbids her to eat sweets because they can spoil her teeth. She tells Mrs. Linde and Dr. Rank that “Torvald had forbidden them [macaroons]. I must tell you that he is afraid they will spoil my teeth” (20). At twelve places the lexeme ‘sweet’ is used for Nora which refers to socially-constructed feature of woman. She must be ‘sweet’ in all senses; sweet in appearance and sweet in behavior.

### **Socially Constructed Language**

Kristeva’s social language is the socially-constructed language which associates wit only to man. The woman is fickle, duffer, half-wit, erratic and capricious. Torvald takes Nora casually in the entire drama and is sure, even prior to her any action, that she cannot use her brain like millions of her gender. He says to Nora, “The same little featherhead” (04). At another place he says, “You are an odd little soul” (06). In fact the social constructions entitle man with wit, intelligence and reason, and entitle woman with fickleness and capriciousness. Such constructions eventually lead the woman to think herself as “incapable of anything really serious” (13). She loses her confidence and surrenders to the prevalent image of herself. In Act I, Nora herself accepts that she is a ‘skylark’ and ‘squirrel’. She says, “You [Torvald] haven't any idea how many expenses we skylarks and squirrels have” (06).

Males are self-sufficient, brave, confident, independent, witty, and egoistic according to the prevalent social structures. They can never tolerate owing anything to the female gender. On Mrs. Linde’s question that why Nora did not arrange money with her husband’s consent Nora

replies: “how painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly independence, to know that he owed me anything! It would upset our mutual relations altogether” (15-16). Here the phrase ‘manly-independence’ is very interesting. Man himself is always endowed with this ‘manly independence’ but does not permit it in woman. In the last act where Torvald suspects this ‘manly independence’ in Nora he immediately tries to charm her again with his words and says:

Be at rest, and feel secure; I have broad wings to shelter you under ... Here is shelter for you; here I will protect you like a hunted dove that I have saved from a hawk's claws; I will bring peace to your poor beating heart. It will come, little by little, Nora, believe me. ... There is something so indescribably sweet and satisfying, to a man, in the knowledge that he has forgiven his wife--forgiven her freely, and with all his heart. It seems as if that had made her, as it were, doubly his own; he has given her a new life, so to speak; and she has in a way become both wife and child to him. So you shall be for me after this, my little scared, helpless darling. Have no anxiety about anything, Nora (72-73).

Man is the master, a shelter-provider and a forgiver. These are socially formulated boundaries where both genders are specified with their socially constructed rules. Change in these rules is a taboo.

### **Semiotic Mode of Language**

Kristeva, however, makes it clear that semiotic mode of language is natural hence pleasure giving and satisfaction providing. The example which fortifies this argument is obvious in the scene where Nora feels satisfaction and pleasure in working like a man. “It was a tremendous pleasure to sit there working and earning money. It was like being a man” (16). Here she seems to break that taboo which is associated with socially constructed roles and duties. In the last when Nora leaves the Helmer-House, she once again rejects the society, its roles, its associated symbols and above all it can be termed a journey back to nature which takes both genders on equal terms, where semiotics and symbolic co-relate. She says:

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 (79).

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## Conclusion

The paper can be concluded in Kristeva's words:

The time has come for each and every woman, in whatever way we can, to confront the controversial values once held to be universal truths by our culture, and to subject them to an interminable analysis (Kristeva, 1986: 115-116).

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