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NORA HELMER'S VALOR AGAINST THE CONSERVATIVE ROLE OF WOMEN IN *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

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Abstract

Ibsen's character Nora Helmer is the symbol of women's freedom of twentieth century. The present study deals with the plight of contemporary women and Nora's boldness against the conservative social norms. Henrik Ibsen is renowned for depicting the social problems and standing against the social stigma through his plays. Nora, the beautiful housewife whom at first, we thought to be the woman who only wishes to please her husband along with her fulfillment of household duties but her drastic decision of searching for her own identity by leaving her home is the main theme of this paper. The researchers wanted to explore the transformation of Nora from a doll to a human being. It also brings her courage to break the conventional ideas about women in that period when women are working hard to get their equal rights. It also shows Ibsen's abilities to picture women like Nora in the context of both in their individual area and in relation to the people around them and show her compatibility to act according to the reverse situation. The researchers showed the importance of Ibsen's plays to us till today as they reveal strong female individual who can live through their pain and start afresh like a phoenix and make an effort to change the society in their own ways. The paper deals with contemporary women's plight in the society and Nora's stand against it.

Keywords: *Valor, contemporary women's plight, society's view, freedom*

1. Introduction

Henrik Ibsen, being an unconventional leading modern playwright always probed into the social quandaries and dilemmas. He tried to give a new dimension to the problem. His writings were indeed extraordinary. In his celebrated drama *A Doll's House* his writing exposes a profound exploration of domestic, communal, educational, financial, and emotional differences faced by women in their daily life. Ibsen is prominent among the audience, critics, reviewers, and scholars around the world for creating his women characters with a new brightness standing opposite to the conventional ideas. He masterly deals with the inside trauma of women and tries to put them in a new horizon against the conventional rule. Even today Ibsen's plays are still significant because they reveal influential female characters that with their special approaches make a difference to the society. Nora is one of the foremost heroines of Ibsen who surprises the audience with her drastic decision of leaving home to become an individual human being against the conventional woman's role and shows her boldness to start a new era for women's rights. Not only that Ibsen had given women a vigorous and burly voice by creating some powerful female characters like Nora Helmer,

Mrs. Alving, HeddaGabler, and Hilda Wangel. Ibsen's female characters are distinguished with their own qualities. Ibsen's women are self-conceited in appearance. They make themselves like this because the male dominated society wants them like this. He shows us how women act to be dull though they have their own intelligence to become a successful human being in the society. In this patriarchal society women are always considered to be subservient than male. He creates a collection of interesting female characters in a male dominated society. Nora is the most colorful characters among them. Nora is always considered to be the most brave and intelligent character among Ibsen's female characters. That's why still today, critics are having discussion on this character. Though she used to get mostly the positive review and regarded as the pioneer of the women's movement, still she got so many negative reviews. Even the last scene was written with a different point of view where Nora would be coming back to her husband by sacrificing her role of searching for her own identity. This decision of writing a new ending was appropriate for the patriarchic society of that time which could not digest Nora's boldness of leaving home as they considered women to be weak and fragile.

2. Objectives

The article depicts Ibsen's attitude towards female repression, marginalization, subordination, psychological trauma, predicament, rights, and oppression of the 19th century society. The paper also observes Ibsen's ability to explore potent women characters in relation with their individual personality and with the people around them. In this article, the researchers took an attempt to justify Nora's decision and activities by making her an epithet of women's freedom against the contemporary society.

3. Literature Review

Nora, the protagonist of *A Doll's House* shows her determination in an adverse situation where she takes the decision against the conventional women's role of the contemporary society. Ibsen's plays depict many influential women characters in extraordinary ways. His plays have been criticized in many countries by various critics in negative or positive way. Accordingly, his women characters are criticized positively or negatively. Especially, Nora from *A Doll's House* is criticized severely for her drastic decision of leaving her husband. She was criticized both in positive or negative point of view. In this article the researcher wants to show the advancement of women in 20th century through the character of Nora. According to Marholm (1890), the plays of Ibsen were surprisingly unusual for that time of 19th century; she read Ibsen for the first time in 1883 and declared this moment as a true revelation. Ibsen's plays had manipulating effect on Marholm and other women in the 1880s. Women in Ibsen's plays typically function as individuals who revolted against the rules of society. She complimented the women's boldness in Ibsen's plays.

Ibsen's knowledge of humanity is nowhere more obvious than in his portrayal of women. He amazes one by his painful introspection; he seems to know them better than they now themselves (Aarseth, 1997, p. 9). Templeton (1989: 28) opines that Henrik Ibsen's most famous play *A Doll's House* may not even be concerned about the women's cause but rather about humans and individualism in general. Nora, the protagonist, may not merely be a feminist heroine but rather a representation of Everyman. According to Durbach (1982), Nora Helmer and Mrs. Alving want freedom from everything that hinders their improvement. Durbach thought that Ibsen's women characters and their rebellion bears the hallmark of protest. In the early social and realistic plays, the husband is a representative of society .Ibsen tries to break this taboo by glorifying his women characters.

4. Methodology

To develop this topic, the primary idea is found from the study of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and many criticisms of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* by many critics published in the shape of different books and literary journals. For development of the topic the study is prepared in a planned way. The conceptual analysis was adopted with the secondary sources for this study. The researchers

went through different critical books, and literary web sites to find out related study materials. The researchers also visited different libraries to collect diverse information from different journals and critical analyses of *A Doll's House* for preparing this article in a more acceptable way. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Plight of women in the 19th century

From the very beginning of the civilization, women are inferior to men. They are never considered to be equal to man. On the onset of 19th century this condition was not changed much.

Women fought a long, hectic and complicated fight with the purpose of gaining the same rights as males. Every person of the society holds the idea that women are considered to take care of the males, their home and children. They should be dependent on men for their necessities and facilities. Women were valued very little by nineteenth century society. The treatment of these women was also extremely negative.

It was a frightening thought for most of the persons of the society that women have their own voice and opinion, and not just be trapped in the house with the children and with their domestic works. The role of women was inferior to that of a man, especially in marriages. Maximum people had the mindset that a woman's real place is at her house where she can take care of the children, do the domestic chores and they would follow this from ages to ages. Even some of the women were satisfied to fulfill marital duties and satisfying her husband as it was traditional mind set for them and they could not break or would not break the cycle of this approach. Religion also preached this kind of concept that women were mediocre to men and they should follow what the patriarch society was giving instructions. Every important things of the society such as power, economy, and politics were under the control of men. Women were not even given the power to vote. The male portion of the society thought that women didn't possess the power of proper thinking to cast their vote and choose a leader though they hold 51% of the population. They thought that women were not capable of understanding these important things such as ruling country and choosing leaders. They were thought to be not having logical reasoning at all. Though women held the more moral standard than men and more religious but all the religious leaders were men. Women were the strongest competent in the religious parishioners.

At the onset of 20th century women did not have the right to control family size and it depended on husband. The church observed it as a crime similar to execution, and the government thought it "obscene." It was for the reason to keep women out of the workplace by having lost of children, to raise them and kept them out of position where they could gain power, economic freedom and their own identity. It was believed that only men needed jobs. Many states had laws that if men were available, women couldn't legally work—or if a woman's husband worked, she couldn't. Women were thought to be physically weak, fragile and unfit than men. Women were kept busy with vacuum cleaners, toasters, and washing machine, baby formula and cake mixes. This was the idea of technology for female and it was designed to make them more effective at domestic chores. Men worked scheming, developed, and marketing these items outside whereas women stayed home working to create a "refuge" for tired and exhausted men. Women were considered as menial than men or as sex objects. When some women were working, they were given the lesser wages than men though they were working the same hour with same hard labor.

By the middle of the 1980s, women were still doing feminine professions, like nursing and teaching. Women were considered to be the household burden and slave of men. Women should have the qualities of modesty, humility, vulnerability, fragility, gratefulness. Obedience should be their supreme virtue. According to Mary Wollstonecraft in her famous essay 'A vindication to the rights of women" described that how women from their childhood were given the lesson to become fit for men. They were prepared themselves for marriage. They were given a little education so that they can present themselves in front of the men. They were taught to be fragile and do the pretention of depending on men. "Women are told from their infancy, and taught by their mothers' example, that a little knowledge of human weakness, softness of

temperament, outward obedience, and scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and if they are also beautiful, that's all they need for at least twenty years" (Wollstonecraft, 1792). So, women are to be considered either as moral beings or as so weak that they must be entirely subjected to the superior faculties of men. Even some of the intellectuals of the society thought that women had less intelligence than men and God had created them to be lesser intelligent than men. This was the circumstance of women in 19th century. Even Ibsen himself said that "a woman cannot be herself in modern society, because it is an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint". Here in this article the researcher tries to cite from different articles, essays and write-ups to depict the stipulation of women in 19th century and tries to illustrate Nora's stand against it.

5.2. Ibsen's portrayal of women characters

Ibsen's characters are the ordinary people from the regular life but Ibsen portrays them with some amazing qualities which make them stand aside the crowd. Specially his women characters surpass the male characters and succeed to win the hearts of everyone by showing their unusual characteristics in every adverse situation. His women characters are noticeable with great dedication towards their goals and to find the true meaning of life. They undergo great soreness to protect self-respect and privileges as human beings rather than compliant to the male governed society. Most of the heroines of Ibsen, like Nora Helmer, Mrs. Alving, and HeddaGabler, are trying to prove themselves as human being, rather than simply a woman. The word "woman," actually, imposed the "role" on her projected by the society or man, who sets standard for her. But in Ibsen's dramas we find the women characters that are rather opposite to these qualities. These unconventional women characters at first try to establish themselves as human being by going opposite to the conventional tide.

Moreover, they possess intelligence, ambition, resolution, and incompatible personality. They are the source of inspiration for today's women socially, economically, politically, and psychologically. Ibsen's women characters are sometimes feeble, broken and submissive and sometimes strong, independent and intelligent. They are determined, sovereign, intellectual, and full of vigor. With the strong personalities, they are cramped to a male centered society where they are deprived of basic right of human beings. But the playwright depicts powerful female characters, including Nora, Mrs. Laving, and Huda who are unusual in their own way to protest against the conventional way the society regarding women. Her women characters are always dealing with some unusual problems that the other women thought to be menial. The search for own self is the utopian thought to the women of that time but through the character of Nora, Ibsen shows that women are also equal to male and they have their own identity as well as their desire, opinion and financial freedom.

5.3. Nora's valor against the social norm

Nora, the heroine of the most staged drama "A Doll's House" by Henrik Ibsen, is the symbol of Women's freedom on the onset of 20th century. She is considered to be the boldest characters of Ibsen's heroines who gave the courage to the women of 19th century to search for their identity as human being not only as women. Nora's eminent verdict to walk out on her marriage and make her own means in this patriarchal society of *A Doll's House* is highly appreciated at that time.

Primarily we get Nora as a naïve individual relentlessly trying to entertain her husband. She always 'play-acts' for Torvald and she enjoys doing so. Nora has the responsibility of dealing household issues. However, when it was found out that she borrowed the funds that allowed her and her husband to travel to Italy for a year in order to improve Torvald's health, Nora reveals that she is actually a much stronger character than originally portrayed. But the real problem arises with the way in which she borrowed the money. In order to get the cash, Nora counterfeits her father's signature and as a result, she is in debt to the man who leant her money, Nils Krogstad. And this way Nora's offense appears almost courageous in the context of that time. When we first meet her,

she doesn't seem to have a care in the world. She is sweet and childish and depending on her activities a little annoying.

With the progress of the play, we learn that Nora is not as a blithe and immature as she is in the beginning, rather she is a determined and hardworking young woman willing to break the laws to save the life of her husband. She is more than the 19th century wife and mother, enjoys working and earning money "like a man", and shows independence of thought in her actions, and fierce determination and ambition to pay off debts. At the end of the play, when she realizes that her husband is not the man she thought, she takes the controversial decision to leave her husband and children to make her own way in the world, rejecting the idea of the ideal family life and the expectations of society. From the beginning onwards, like woman of the nineteenth century Europe, Nora patiently puts her efforts and attempts to maintain peaceful life accepting all customs and rules established by the male dominated society, but when it goes beyond her capacity to bear the circumstances, very firmly she leaves husband's house to make herself free from the shackles of the society upholding the principles of freedom and equality. Her journey from a very dependent wife to an independent enlightened woman transforms Nora into a very bold, intellectual and firm to fight against society. When Nora slams the door at the end of the play (what critics have famously called the "shot heard round the world") the slam created a much louder ruckus during the nineteenth century than what it does in modern times.

Nora, right from the beginning has shown a conventional wife who leads life as per the directions, expectations of her husband. She allows her husband to treat her like a 'property' and 'possession', because she has a belief that only husband can protect wife in all circumstances. But when she realizes it was not the love but man's pride to take woman as his possessions, she says, "I have had great injustice done me, Torvald, first by my father and then by you (113)". Nora asserts that either it is a father or husband there is no change in their attitude.

In closing the door of her husband and children, Nora opened the way to the 19th century women's movement. From the beginning we find that Nora is the perfect house wife who always maintains the formalities and duties towards her family. She is the perfect house wife, a great mother and a social butterfly. To Torvald, she is everything that a man wants from a woman. From this view everything seems so content and soothing. She is most child-like when she interacts with her husband. She behaves playfully yet obediently in his presence, always coaxing favors from him instead of communicating as equals. Torvald gently chides Nora throughout the play, and Nora good-naturedly responds to his critics as though she were some loyal pet. She seems to be the house maker but actually she needs to depend on every little thing on her husband. She has no social or financial freedom. He always considered her to be fragile and weak. To him she is the dull woman without intelligence and he is the protector who always saves her from every problem. Nora's only role in the family has been a remunerated servant who cares for children that have been commended to her. At first glance, one might think that the Helmers have a successful marriage—but only at a superficial level. This pretty makes believe scene of a perfect home is shattered when we find that Nora took a loan from the bank by forging her father's signature in order to take care of her husband's health. The conventional society couldn't take this. Nora did this for her family it was totally neglected and the bigger issue was that by forging she destroyed her husband's reputation in the society. But Torvald forgets that if she didn't take that decision on that time Torvald wouldn't be in this manager position now.

The stereotype thinking of male from the society couldn't digest this brave action of Nora. As we find that in that society women were not allowed to work, especially the high-class women. But Nora did a job stealthily to repay the loan which also enraged Torvald more. As being a proud male, he does what he has to do, he tells Nora to leave the house as she is not fit to be a mother to his children. He thinks that she is morally corrupted and her children will learn this corruption from her and make him disgraceful in the society. In one moment, Nora's whole world is shattered. Nora's married life is based on the false concept of love, "You have never loved me! You only thought it amusing to be in love with me" (113).She is nobody for them, for him, for her family. This sudden realization shakes her totally. She feels that actually she belongs nowhere. She is

trying to find her existence. Though after a short time, Torvald tries to give her the impression that he wants to forgive her because Krogstad gave back all the documents which could destroy his reputation. But it seems that Nora has nothing to say. As usual, Torvald was taking the decision.

But in this friction of moment Nora's whole world is changed. Torvald, who takes Nora for granted, is surprised to see Nora's boldness against his decision. She is not thinking about the forgery but she is thinking that for whom she is doing this and for whom she is living and leading her false life. For one moment she becomes an outsider; and she has no opinion regarding her own life. Most notably, it gives her with the familiarity that facilitates her to write her own biography and endows her with the confidence to gain a multiplicity of roles arraying from wife to friend, mother to petty job holder, until comprehending at the end of the play that her quest should be to find herself as a human being.

At that moment she tries to focus on her identity. She realizes that actually she is nothing as Mrs. Nora Helmer; it is a false identity that she is trying to grip up. She forgets that she has an individual identity as a human being and after this shocking realization she takes that revolutionary decision to leave her family behind to quest for her own individual self. She cannot take the burden of that false identity of Nora Helmer by wearing a false mask. And this decision which she takes to leave her family makes her the symbol of women's freedom in 19th century when no woman can think apart from their family. Being an independent woman, she is bold to say directly to her husband, "I can't spend the night in a strange man's house." (121). Even when her husband tries to interrupt her, she instructed him by saying, "No, don't interrupt. Only listen to what I say." (112) Thus, the intellectual, bold and firm Nora fights for her own identity, status, equality and freedom. Nora discards her marriage in quest for identity as a human being which makes other women to think of themselves as well. It is not the idea of discarding of their marriage but let the men realize that they are also different human being who are capable of thinking.

6. Conclusion

From Ibsen's age to the present Ibsen's potent women characters gain the positive receptions of readers, researchers, scholars, critics, dramatic artists, audience, producers, translators, actors, actress, and so on in many countries of the world. Among them Nora is considered the most influential heroine who deserves the utmost attraction of everyone for her rebellious decision of leaving her family in quest for her own identity. Nora is considered to be the epitome of feminist freedom of 20th century because of her drastic decision of leaving her long cherished home, even her children to search for own identity and freedom. And this thing was totally unknown at that time to the society's people as they considered women to be weak, fragile and dependent. So, by taking this decision Nora established herself as a rebel to the society and she shows the other women that they also have their individual identity.

They are not the menial part of the society. They have equal rights as the men and they can do anything as the men can do. Ibsen has presented Nora as bold, innovative, prevailing, unconventional figure against the puny, broken, subservient, conventional and meek categories women of the society. Nora is the symbol of achieving women's own identity, autonomy, self-existence, empowerment, right, and suffragettes of 19th century.

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