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Literary Research Paper

IBSEN'S VOICE FOR WOMEN'S INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY: A STUDY FROM *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

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Abstract

Henrik Ibsen, an eminent 19th-century Norwegian playwright produced a number of influential and realistic plays describing the true scenario of the society of that time. A number of his plays including *A Doll's House, Hedda Gabler, Ghost, The Pillars of Society, An Enemy of The People* have depicted the issues related to marriage, conjugal life, patriarchy, feminism, social injustice, women's suppressed condition and their struggle for independence. The present study focused on unfolding the scenario of women's struggle represented in *A Doll's House*. The researcher chose content analysis, a kind of qualitative research method as the avenue of the current study. The study explored that after being understood the subordinate condition, women started struggling and fighting against the so-called rules of patriarchal society. The struggle of Nora starting with a subconscious mind and ending with a very clear conscious step clearly pictured the struggle of the women folk of that time. A number of notable issues supports Nora's struggle to gain individual identity resulting in borrowing money without the consent of Torvald, arranging the whole trip for her husband's treatment, bold dealing with Krogstad and finally leaving husband and family by the slamming of the door towards exploring herself where there are a number of new open doors with numerous opportunity and freedom.

Keywords: Women, Identity, Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, Independence

1. Introduction

A Doll's House reflects the true condition of women of the era of Henrik Ibsen when women did not have minimum status that an individual should have as Arthur mentioned with reference to Radek (2008) that it was forbidden to have autonomy of women. Their only duty was giving birth, looking after children at home and maintaining home affairs as per the choice of the male part of the family. In this situation, a kind of self-awareness also started to grow among the women through a significant change from agricultural to industrial aspect (Lambert, 2009). So, a kind of reaction started among the women for all kind of injustice done to them by the patriarchal society and that reaction helped them to initiate the feminist movement (Porter in Beasley, 1999).

In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen unfolds the core social problems, specially the problems regarding the women's position in society. Here, Ibsen is mainly concerned about individual rights in the society. It is seen that the protagonist of the play Nora leaves her house by slamming of a door to enter into the new door of realization and independence. This awareness helps Nora to start a new beginning to the

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pathway of a new life full of individuality that is one of the core issues discussed by Ibsen. Nora ultimately opens her eyes and realizes that her individual identity and freedom have been taken in living with Torvald Helmer. In a certain stage, she can easily understand her oppressed condition from where she needs to react. Nora realizes that she should not be emotional anymore for the fake reasons and that is why she refuses the supremacy of her husband as Bertens says: Once the social and cultural restraints on women have been lifted, women will be as autonomous and self-determining as men (Bertens, 2001). So, the current study mainly focuses on the issues of women's struggle for gaining true individual identity in *A Doll's House* of Henrik Ibsen.

2. Literature Review

According to Lowy (2004), Ibsen discovered the 'New Woman' who understood their critical and vulnerable position in the society and showed the true courage to revolt against the patriarchal system and they were the pioneer to open up the new horizon, horizon for self-dependency and freedom as a human or individual. According to Case (1986), the representation of the issues of 'Woman" or gender specially initiated through the phenomena of the sub-ordination women in the era of Ibsen. Rajeswar, (2013) mentioned that Ibsen's writings basically deal with the equal rights of women in every arena including social, political and economic fields. He also explored the real scenario of the condition of women at that time, especially Nora, the heroine of the respective play who transformed herself from a silly doll to a very bold and free woman. According to Dan (2007), Ibsen's writings basically uncovered the social injustice done to the woman. He investigated that Ibsen portrayed how women of his time sacrificed their wishes for the satisfaction of the male part of the society and how they finally came to understand their own mistake and took real actions against all types of injustice done with them. Pravitasari (2013) mentioned that women faced a lot of unsatisfactory happenings with the women and that had been pictured out in the plays of Henrik Ibsen, especially in A doll's House. Ibsen paid special attention to the overall scenario of the condition of women starting from the everyday problems they face, their struggle for seeing them free from those kinds of suppression and pleasant scenario of making themselves really free at the final stage. According to Hossain (2016), Ibsen truly realized the marginal condition of women and through his writing he gave them the strong voice to shout against the oppression done by the patriarchal system of the society. So, all the studies are closely related to the current one as all of the works are concern with some common key issues regarding Ibsen's main focus in his writing. Besides, none of the studies mainly focused on the theme that the current study intended to do. So, the present study will definitely provide some unique significant insights in the respective field of research.

3. Findings and Discussion

The *A Doll's House* proceeds with the progress of the protagonist Nora who can understand her true condition in the family as well as in the society with the turning of time and starts her struggle to transform herself from a doll to an individual human being that also comes true finally. Basically, the whole play, *A Doll's House* is concerned with the chronological subconscious and conscious changes of Nora. And all these themes are discussed in this section of the study.

At the very beginning of the play, Nora is seen to be treated like a doll who has no freedom. With the development of the play, Nora's effort of gaining individual identity starts to be uncovered, especially when her school friend Mrs. Linden visits her and expresses her individual struggle for the betterment of her mother and brothers. Mrs. Linden's story of greatness elicits Nora to unfold her story that she has saved Torvald's life. After their marriage, her husband was so sick that doctor suggested them to go to Italy for the treatment but Torvald disagreed to make loan for the trip to Italy. Torvald's condition was so critical that Nora alone took a bold decision without considering the custom of the male dominant society. She took a big amount of loan and arranged the trip to Italy though she was pregnant at that time. Even, she said Torval that her father had given all that money only to show respect to Torvald's firm personality. Her intensive care helped Torvald to recover such an illness. This happening indicates the very first attempt of Nora's struggle for Individual identity. This theme is well expressed in the following lines of the play:

NORA. Come over here. [Draws her down beside her on the sofa.] Yes, Christina- I, too, have something to be proud and glad of. I saved Torvald's life.
MRS. LINDEN. Saved his life? How?
NORA. I told you about our going to Italy. Torvald would have died but for that.
MRS. LINDEN. Well- and your father gave you the money.
NORA. [Smiling.] Yes, so Torvald and every one believes; but- MRS. LINDEN. But-?
NORA. Papa didn't give us one penny. It was I that found the money.
MRS. LINDEN. You? All that money?
NORA. Twelve hundred dollars. Four thousand eight hundred crowns. What do you say to that?
MRS. LINDEN. My dear Nora, how did you manage it? (Act-I, P-43, 44)

Day-night struggle of Nora is seen regarding loan paying that she had to borrow for the treatment of her husband. After the recovery of her husband she could easily disclose the issue to him and take his help to pay the loan but she took it as an individual struggle of her. She discloses to Mrs. Linden that to pay the loan, she spent most of the amount of money got from Torvald in any purpose like buying clothes and so on. She always bought cheap things for herself only to save money and even, she did very hard work in the last winter only to earn an amount of money to pay her loan. All these points are clearer in the following lines of the play:

NORA. Yes, of course. After all, the whole thing was my doing. When Torvald gave me money for clothes, and so on, I never spent more than half of it; I always bought the simplest and cheapest things. It's a mercy that everything suits me so well- Torvald never had any suspicions. But it was often very hard, Christina dear. For it's nice to be beautifully dressed- now, isn't it?
MRS.LINDEN. Indeed it is.
NORA. Well, and besides that, I made money in other ways. Last winter I was so lucky- I got a heap of copying to do. I shut myself up every evening and wrote far into the night. Oh, sometimes I was so tired, so tired. And yet it was splendid to work in that way and earn money. I almost felt as if I was a man. (Act-I, P-48)

Boldness in the character of Nora comes into light when she has to deal with Krogstad who threatens her different ways. Krogstad threatens her to disclose her secrets regarding loan if Torvald dismisses him from his position in the bank. Even, when he teases Nora's husband, she clearly reacts very boldly and informs him that she is not afraid of him anymore. These issues are well expressed in the following lines of the play:

KROGSTAD. Oh, I know your husband from our college days. I don't think he is any more inflexible than other husbands.
NORA. If you talk disrespectfully of my husband, I must request you to leave the house.
KROGSTAD. You are bold, madam.
NORA. I am afraid of you no longer. When New Year's Day is over, I shall soon be out of the whole business.
KROGSTAD. [Controlling himself.] Listen to me, Mrs. Helmer. If need be, I shall fight as though for my life to keep my little place in the Bank. (Act-I, P-65)

Nora's transformation from a subservient and controlled wife to an independent human being is seen more flourishing from the 2nd act of the play. She starts to think of being a woman free from all the society-made ties that indicates two paths, one is being free from this world by committing suicide and other is leaving the family. This thinking is completely connected to her secret of loan that she did independently without the concern of her husband. So, this is very much related to her struggle for individual identity. And from this perception, she asked her nurse if her children can forget her when she is away from them that has been pointed in the lines below:

NORA. Do you think they do? Do you believe they would forget their mother if she went quite away?
ANNA. Gracious me! Quite away? (Act-II, P-83)

Only to keep her bold and individual great doing secret, Nora struggles a lot with Torvald to keep Krogstad in his position, otherwise he can do any harm to them through destroying their reputation but finally her all the doings results in zero that is seen in the below mentioned dialogue between Nora and Krogstad:

NORA. What do you want?
KROGSTAD. A little information.
NORA. Be quick, then. What is it?
KROGSTAD. You know I have got my dismissal.
NORA. I couldn't prevent it, Mr. Krogstad. I fought for you to the last, but it was of no use. (Act-II, P-111, 112)

Very conscious and crystal-clear thinking for true freedom and its implementation starts working in Nora when the long-cherished secrets is about to be disclosed before Torvald. Earlier, it has been seen that being confirmed the dismissal from the bank, Krogstad writes a letter to Torvald describing all the issues related to Nora's borrowing of money from him. Though Nora tries her best to stop Torvald from getting that letter and reading it, her struggle is of no use finally. Reading the letter from Krogstad, Torvald starts blaming Nora for such doing. He cannot believe such a work of Nora being detached from so called society's law, though the effort was only to save his life. Though he should be grateful to her wife for such a great thing and take the whole responsibility on his shoulder, he hurts her calling hypocrite, liar, criminal etc. All these cruel reaction from Torvald opens up a new kingdom, the kingdom of conscious and free thinking before Nora. These themes are concerned with the following section of the play:

HELMER. Nora!
NORA. [Shrieks.] Ah-!
HELMER. What is this? Do you know what is in this letter?
NORA. Yes, I know. Let me go! Let me pass!
HELMER. [Holds her back.] Where do you want to go?
NORA. [Tries to break away from him.] You shall not save me, Torvald.
HELMER. [Falling back.] True! Is what he writes true? No, no, it is impossible that this can be true.
NORA. It is true. I have loved you beyond all else in the world.
HELMER. Pshaw- no silly evasions!
NORA. [A step nearer him.] Torvald-!
HELMER. Wretched woman- what have you done!
NORA. Let me go- you shall not save me! You shall not take my guilt upon yourself!
HELMER. I don't want any melodramatic airs. [Locks the outer door.] Here you shall stay and give an account of yourself. Do you understand what you have done? Answer! Do you understand it?
NORA. [Looks at him fixedly, and says with a stiffening expression.] Yes; now I begin fully to understand it.
HELMER. [Walking up and down.] Oh! what an awful awakening! During all these eight years- she who was my pride and my joy- a hypocrite, a liar- worse, worse- a criminal. Oh, the unfathomable hideousness of it all! Ugh! Ugh!
[NORA says nothing, and continues to look fixedly at him. (Act-III, P-153, 154)

Just after realizing her true place to her husband whom she loved more than herself, she begins her real action to the way of maturity and individualism. Being treated very ungratefully by Torvald after the unfolding of her secret, Nora calls her husband very boldly for a serious talk that alarms him. Here, Nora says him that they really did not understood each other for all these years and that is why it is time to do everything practically and seriously. It is seen from Nora's statement that they did not have a single session of discussion in any serious issue as husband and wife. And this is the moment,

Nora can understand the injustice done to her by her husband and father only for being a woman. This significant issue is better understood from the following dialogue between Nora and Torvald:

NORA. Sit down. It will take some time. I have much to talk over with you.
HELMER. You alarm me, Nora. I don't understand you.
NORA. No, that is just it. You don't understand me; and I have never understood you- till to-night. No, don't interrupt. Only listen to what I say.- We must come to a final settlement, Torvald.
HELMER. How do you mean?
NORA. [After a short silence.] Does not one thing strike you as we sit here?
HELMER. What should strike me?
NORA. We have been married eight years. Does it not strike you that this is the first time we two, you and I, man and wife, have talked together seriously?
HELMER. Seriously! What do you call seriously?
NORA. During eight whole years, and more- ever since the day we first met- we have never exchanged one serious word about serious things.
HELMER. Was I always to trouble you with the cares you could not help me to bear?
NORA. I am not talking of cares. I say that we have never yet set ourselves seriously to get to the bottom of anything.
HELMER. Why, my dearest Nora, what have you to do with serious things?
NORA. There we have it! You have never understood me. - I have had great injustice done me, Torvald; first by father, and then by you. (Act-III, P-161, 162)

Now, Nora can clearly understand that Torvald has never been in true love with her which could give her equal respect, freedom and so on. She has always been an amusing entertaining and adorable identity to her husband and father as well. She has not had her own opinion regarding any issue in her father house and same as to Torvald. She has been shaped such a way who is always in passive mood. In her super-conscious thinking, she can easily realize that she was nothing but a doll to her father and to her husband as well. It means that she has moved physically from father's house to husband house but no mental movement from the play room to practical world and immaturity to maturity that has been occurred until this final stage. These thoughts have made her fit to understand another big issue that she has to educate herself for maturity and this education cannot be provided by her husband. All these points are closely concerned with the following section of the play:

NORA. [Shaking her head.] You have never loved me. You only thought it amusing to be in love with me.
HELMER. Why, Nora, what a thing to say!
NORA. Yes, it is so, Torvald. While I was at home with father, he used to tell me all his opinions, and I held the same opinions. If I had others, I said nothing about them, because he wouldn't have liked it. He used to call me his doll-child, and played with me as I played with my dolls. Then I came to live in your house-
HELMER. What an expression to use about our marriage!
NORA. [Undisturbed.] I mean I passed from father's hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your taste; and I got the same tastes as you; or I pretended to- I don't know which- both ways, perhaps; sometimes one and sometimes the other. When I look back on it now, I seem to have been living here like a beggar, from hand to mouth. I lived by performing tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so. You and father have done me a great wrong. It is your fault that my life has come to nothing.
HELMER. Why, Nora, how unreasonable and ungrateful you are! Have you not been happy here?
NORA. No, never. I thought I was; but I never was.
HELMER. Not- not happy!
NORA. No; only merry. And you have always been so kind to me. But our house has been nothing but a play-room. 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.
HELMER. There is some truth in what you say, exaggerated and overstrained though it be. But henceforth it shall be different. Play-time is over; now comes the time for education.
NORA. Whose education? Mine, or the children's?
HELMER. Both, my dear Nora.
NORA. Oh, Torvald, you are not the man to teach me to be a fit wife for you. (Act-III, P-163, 164, 165)

After the true realization of her practical condition to her husband, Nora comes to the turning point that she needs to educate herself being free from everything surrounded. She finally decides to leave the Torvald's house, Torval and the children except her belongings only. She clearly declares that she will take nothing from her husband forever. In replies to her husband's forbidding to leave home, Nora boldly says that she does not care his command anymore. To better understand the world, Nora is now ready to get experience individually. This important theme is explored in the following lines of the play:

HELMER. Nora! Nora!
NORA. I am going at once. I daresay Christina will take me in for to-night-
HELMER. You are mad! I shall not allow it! I forbid it!
NORA. It is of no use your forbidding me anything now. I shall take with me what belongs to me. From you I will accept nothing, either now or afterwards.
HELMER. What madness this is!
NORA. To-morrow I shall go home- I mean to what was my home. It will be easier for me to find some opening there.
HELMER. Oh, in your blind inexperience-
NORA. I must try to gain experience, Torvald. (Act-III, P-166)

At the point of climax, it is explored that Nora replies very boldly and carelessly to her husband that she does not care what the whole world thinks about her regarding her so called male dominated society made duties to husband, children and so on. Now she confidently thinks that it is time to proceed only and to be dutiful to own self. Though most of the people think very traditionally of several duties concerned to a mother and wife but now Nora is seen to think of her duties to herself who wishes nothing more than being a true human being, not a male or female rather an individual and free identity. All these turning issues are unfolded in the following dialogue between Nora and Helmer:

HELMER. To forsake your home, your husband, and your children! And you don't consider what the world will say.
NORA. I can pay no heed to that. I only know that I must do it.
HELMER. This is monstrous! Can you forsake your holiest duties in this way?
NORA. What do you consider my holiest duties?
HELMER. Do I need to tell you that? Your duties to your husband and your children.
NORA. I have other duties equally sacred.
HELMER. Impossible! What duties do you mean?
NORA. My duties towards myself.
HELMER. Before all else you are a wife and a mother.
NORA. That I no longer believe. I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are- or at least that I should try to become one. I know that most people agree with you, Torvald, and that they say so in books. But henceforth I can't be satisfied with what most people say, and what is in books. I must think things out for myself, and try to get clear about them. (Act-III, P-166, 167, 168)

The ending section of the play is concerned with the most significant message of the play. Nora, the protagonist of the play is seen strongest here. She announces very clearly that she is leaving the house for ever without considering all kinds of so-called relationship with her husband and children even. She does not permit her husband to write her any letter because she cannot think of him more than a stranger from now on and being more than of it needs the miracle of miracles that she thinks impossible. This miracle indicates a completely new starting of a conjugal life being newly married through changing the whole system of society made husband-wife relationship. Finally, Nora is seen leaving the house and the sound of her heavy door closing is heard. This theme is concerned with the following lines of the play:

> NORA. Very well. Now it is all over. I lay the keys here. The servants know about everything in the house- better than I do. To-morrow, when I have started, Christina will come to pack up the things I brought with me from home. I will have them sent after me.
> HELMER. All over! all over! Nora, will you never think of me again?
> NORA. Oh, I shall often think of you, and the children, and this house.
> HELMER. May I write to you, Nora?
> NORA. No- never. You must not.
> HELMER. But I must send you-
> NORA. Nothing, nothing.
> HELMER. I must help you if you need it.
> NORA. No, I say. I take nothing from strangers.
> HELMER. Nora- can I never be more than a stranger to you?
> NORA. [Taking her travelling-bag.] Oh, Torvald, then the miracle of miracles would have to happen-
> HELMER. What is the miracle of miracles?
> NORA. Both of us would have to change so that- Oh, Torvald, I no longer believe in miracles.
> HELMER. But I will believe. Tell me! We must so change that-?
> NORA. That communion between us shall be a marriage. Good-bye. [She goes out by the hall door.
> HELMER. [Sinks into a chair by the door with his face in his hands.] Nora! Nora! [He looks round and rises.] Empty. She is gone. [A hope springs up in him.] Ah! The miracle of miracles-?!
> [From below is heard the reverberation of a heavy door closing. (Act-III, P-174, 175, 176)

So, from the findings and discussions of this section, it can be summed up that though the protagonist of A Doll's House, Nora is seen a doll at the beginning of the play, it is not her real picture. She is really a bold, struggling and powerful woman who knows how to gain logical rights and freedom as an individual that has been proven by the chronological doings of Nora to the way of achieving individual identity throughout the whole play.

4. Conclusion

Based on the above findings and discussion, it is unfolded that Henrik Ibsen has dealt with a number of realistic and very significant issues including the true condition of women and their struggle, scenario of conjugal life, so called rules of society to dominate women and the beginning of consciousness among women regarding their true identity. All these themes are presented in a unique way in *A Doll's House*, Hedda Gabler. Notably, the protagonist of *A Doll's House*, Nora is a representative figure of all women of her time. This issue is uncovered from the very beginning to the end of *A Doll's House* through the chronological transformation of Nora from a doll to a free woman. The protagonist of *A Doll's House*, Nora is seen struggling a lot to achieve an independent and individual identity that has been proved through a number of actions she has taken including borrowing money without the permission and concern of her husband for the sake of making a trip to Italy for her husband's treatment, saving money from own expenditure to pay the loan, hardworking to earn money, boldly dealing with Krogstad, expressing the true feeling of being oppressed by father and husband and finally leaving everything for the sake of discovering herself as a free individual.

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