

Critical Analysis of Nora's conviction at the end of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*: Nora's Stoic Resilience against the Male Domination

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Abstract

This paper tries to explore the inherent struggles of sensitive and honest women in search of their true self-identity under patriarchal powers in the family circles. This research highlights the subjugation of women by their male counterparts and how they suppress their desires and their souls under patriarchal domination. This article explains women's rebellion for their freedom as a fundamental and inevitable consequence that occurs in every family ruled under male egoistic dominance. Not all women become dumb victims and dolls to dance as per man's whims. Some women would rise against the wave of domestic violence and they would fight for their place and values in the home front. They build their own individual lives with their new earned liberties. They do not tolerate any of social institutions that enslave them to organized tyranny of male domination. This paper tries to address women's worries and anxieties that are created by cruel male members in the families. This discourse is presented by taking Nora, the central character in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* as the reference. The final decision made by Nora is viewed through the lens of J.S. Mill's Women Liberation, Frankl Viktor's Existentialism and Baudrillard Modernist theories.

Key Words: Patriarchal domination, Nora, Women freedom

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I. Introduction

A Doll's House is the best known and one of the most popular of Ibsen's realistic dramas. It is a feminist play that depicts women's struggles in Victorian society. It tried to resolve the women's troubles by liberating as strong as independent individuals away from the shackles and restraints orchestrated by the patriarchs in the name of tradition, custom and convention.

There has been much debate in scholastic world about the finale of the drama. Many critics and readers from across the frontiers were not happy with Nora's decision towards the end of the play. In this regard, critics Hafiz Ahmad Bilal and others in their research article state that:

"Under the framework of CDA we are analyzing the text, *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen and in this research paper we are highlighting that the end of Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* is not justified and appropriate. Nora's action of leaving her husband and children comes as a bombshell to the readers... Nora's act of leaving home is a destructive and most selfish one, which shows that Nora was deprived of motherhood love for her children (Bilal, Hafiz Ahmad, et al. 1996)."

They even warned that the decision of leaving home is a destructive and selfish one and that would adversely impact the institution of marriage and family. They also added that divorce will become an easy solution and spoil millions of families.

The finale of the play was a shocking surprise to the characters in the drama and also for the readers and audience. It was far away from the Victorian times. In this 21st century, where women are flying the air jets, it may seem to us as a fitting reply to her dominating husband. But that type of rage and anger in woman though

silent and implicit had never been witnessed in the 19th century England. The door that was closed on Nora's past and indeed on the face of her husband Torvald by Nora had been reverberating on male dominated society.

Torvald is the true replica of patriarchy

Critics and readers thought that Torvald Helmer, the husband of Nora is not that much of cruel to be deserved to get punishment from Nora that she abandoned him ruthlessly at the end of the play. Torvald is a true replica of male dominated society. He had bourgeois type of mentality towards his wife. Torvald thought it was privilege given by her subservient wife Nora. This can be seen hindrance to social progress and not to be promoted as per the saying of John Stuart Mill, as he states:

“That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other (J.S.Mill 145).”

Torvald demands whatever he wants from his wife and commands Nora how she must be according to his whims. Torvald could not think beyond his male confined ego towards his wife. It is impossible for him, to be sympathetic to understand any situation from the point of view of his wife Nora. He is neither sympathetic nor empathetic to understand the true feelings of Nora. He always expects to see Nora as subservient and loving wife to him. He has male possessiveness towards Nora and considers her as his doll and his property. He cannot tolerate if anything goes against his whims and wishes. He thought Nora does not have enough intelligence to understand the things better than him and even convinces her to believe him in this regard. He addressed her with soft names like doll and skylark to suppress her in sweet poisonous ways. He is stereotypical male husband in patriarchal society.

“Nora: It is perfectly true, Torvald. When I was at home with papa, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed from him I concealed the fact, because he would not have liked it. He called me his doll-child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls. (Act III, p.74)”

Torvald did not try to understand at any instance what Nora really wants. He could not have understood Nora at any single instance of their life from marriage to break up of their relationship. He could not think beyond what society generally considers valid. Torvald is hard hearted soul, could not see any world beyond his moral judgements. His wicked goodness would not allow him to see morality in unselfish sacred crimes. He thought the act of Nora as a heinous crime. At the climax, he had become typical villain and cruel judge who broke the heart of Nora with his vicious words and cruel perceptions of her crime. Thus, Torvald failed to prove his love and was blinded to see the true love of Nora and he lost Nora forever.

Reality is Torvald decided the fate of Nora

In fact, it is Torvald who forces her to decide to leave his family and ‘his’ children not mentioned as ‘her’ children. Hence, she should not be blamed for her decision to leave home and children. Torvald thinks of Nora and his children as his property.

There were heated debates revolving around Nora's decision of deserting her family by the scholars and critics. Some were of the jaundiced view pointing fingers towards her as they believed Torvald never intended to harm either Nora or his children. These critics were discounting on individual rights of women like Nora who were treated as ‘possessions’ owned for self-gratification in the name of love and care. It is heart wrenching to note the voices raised against Nora's decision who was considered incapable of parenting children by her husband. He is the main cause for Nora's abandonment of children. Torvald says:

“But the children cannot be left in your care. I dare not trust them to you--.” (P 121)

Nora, at the time of leaving the home, she could not revolt openly with her words against the ideas of Torvald. She silently and simply accepted what Torvald decides as her fate except for the one and only heated argument towards the end of the drama. Torvald strongly opined that immoral mother would be the fundamental cause for the criminal mind-set of her children after they have grown up. Torvald saw Nora as more wildly than a criminal. Thus, Nora was completely and emotionally abandoned by Torvald and his children before she mentally decided to leave them.

No consensus over Nora's final decision

No critic has any thought or consensus about her decision over abandoning her family. Many critics do not support Nora's brave attempt of leaving her domestic roles. Michael Meyer says:

“The wife in the play ends by having no idea what is right and what is wrong; natural feelings on the one hand and belief in authority on the other lead her to utter distraction...Moral conflict. Weighted down and confused by her trust in authority, she loses faith in her own morality, and her fitness to bring up her children. Bitterness.

A mother in modern society, like certain insects, retires and dies once she has done her duty by propagating the race. Love of life, of home, of husband, and children and family. (Azam, Azmi, 2014)”.
Nobody expects what her future decisions may be. What her thoughts burning inside of her heart. Though it is consequential ending to the play but indeed it never ends. Nora's life really starts after she left her family. Before deserting the house Nora demonstrated well about male exploitation of women in family circles. She raised questions about how she was stereotyped like all other ordinary women by her father and her husband.

Torvald bound himself by social status – Nora frees herself from social concerns

There are many insights to the other side of her quest for true identity. Her subservient life in Torvald's family reduced her life and individuality. She cringed when Torvald started the reading of Krogstad's letter revealing about her forgery. Torvald did not give any chance to listen to Nora. She always thought how great she would be to show courage to do forgery to save her husband's life. But all have become reversal of fate. Nora always expected unexpected love would come from Torvald when he knew the truth about her incessant suffering to hide this secret. Torvald only thinks of his security, prestige, image and status in the society. He immediately reacts the situation thinking about himself and his position in the society. He didn't think about Nora's protection. Nora expected Torvald would save her from this danger as she saved him from the illness which can cause him death. She continuously expected some 'wonderful thing' will happen and Torvald would rescue her from the dangers of blame. But reversal has happened. Torvald is bound by social status and traditional orthodoxy. He firmly believes that woman should not take any drastic step at any situation beyond morality. He could not tolerate that criminality of his wife. Apart from that, he angrily speaks that her shadow should not fall on his children. Moreover, he created furthermore miseries to her by breaking the bond of marriage, broke Nora's maternal bond with his children and reduced all the past memories to ashes.

All her life Nora was denied to think on her own, act as she wished and think for herself. She lived selflessly to fulfil others expectations. She never failed to give happiness to her father, her husband and her children. She realizes the hollowness of the sacred promises of marriage institution. In her case, marriage did not give her any freedom and protection. Marriage is just an illusion that serves as a weapon for husbands and kills the souls of wives. Dr. Sandhya Tiwari states in her article *Infidelity, Betrayal and Marital Discord in Manju Kapur's custody* that:

“Marital institution remains just as social necessity that bears no fruit, happiness and pleasure” (Tiwari, Sandhya, 2019)”

Nora was disillusioned about marriage that cannot give any true love. She discovers marriage as a trap for a woman created by the patriarchal world to keep women in family prisons. She hopes to get great love from Torvald to save her from this crisis. Up to certain extent she bears all the troubles and she had gone through for the sake of her husband and no one was aware of that tolerance that was nerve-racking. She loved Torvald without judgment all her life. She felt happy in giving happiness to her husband and her children. Though after all her sacrifices, Torvald treats her as a criminal with his cruel judgement, Nora thought she cannot stay anymore in Torvald Helmer's house. Torvald became stranger in her view. Children also became dolls in her new perspective. She does not want to repeat the vicious cycle of doll world in her life. Thus, she decides to put a full stop to her life with Torvald by leaving his house. Eventually, Nora overcame all her inhibitions and she dared to leave her worthless life.

Nora's metamorphosis at finale of the play

Nora closed the door, stopped her past and started a new beginning. Many thoughts and insights might have evoked in her heart perhaps that may be representative of the sufferings of many women in the patriarchal society. She hopes not only for her independence but also wanted to grow beyond it. There are many questions still to be answered, there are many horizons still to be travelled and there are a few women who could dare to lead a new life breaking the boundaries of cursed customs of society.

In her quest for self-identity, she started a new journey alone. Till the end of the play, she did not think about her real self at any instance. She has been always devoted wife and dedicated mother and a sincere and honest person in the society. Drifting from that mode, she really wants to know herself, what she likes, her innermost desires and what she really wants to be in her life. Her father and her husband never let her to evolve as an individual who is complete by herself. The social construct of patriarchal society reduced her from a capable individual to a doll meant for pleasing the male ego. She experiences how every egotistical male ego falls short to appreciate the feelings of a woman. That might be a father or a husband and all males are same with their egoistic temper. Man's pride will not accept woman empowerment and always expects subjugation of women.

Nora says, “I have had great injustice done to me, Torvald, first by father or then by you. You and Papa have done me a great wrong. It's because of you I've made nothing of my life. (113)”.

There is no change in their male attitudes whatever may be their roles in social structures and social contexts, because of their male ego never allow them to put woman in higher altitudes of social life. Torvald is a fair example for it. He didn't give any intellectual value to his wife and not even thought she could also think like a sensible person. He thought Nora as an innocent and ignorant person and she was intentionally made like a dancing doll by him with pretentious euphemistic terms. This is the common everyday male drama in patriarchal families. It is the patriarchal male egoistic power that always tries to make women as weak sex and powerless. They never allow freedom to women to play major roles like males in the families.

Nora's existence became a big question that stood before her. Her value in Torvald family is raised into question. She lost respect, value, and love in the family. Finally she lost her existence and identity in family. Torvald gave her a death blow by saying her criminal.

"Everywhere there is a crisis of value so that people begin to forget their individuality. This situation encourages existentialists to renew the search for meaning for human existence by returning to man as the center of true philosophy and as the only legitimate power (Frankl, Viktor E, 1985 314)".

She wanted to go beyond her mediocre life that was completely controlled by her husband. Nora was quiet subservient to her husband and her family. At this instance and at the edge of her life, she realized life is more than she lived in the past. She wanted to do something greater to give and higher to achieve. Nora's decision is practically thought provoking one, she decided to become an independent woman in all ways to lead a complete life and discarded an incomplete life. An intense urge for self-respect and self-identity is raised in her heart. She wanted to settle financially and then might want to look after her children with absence of her husband. Finally, she wanted to be free from the shackles of her ruling husband. She thought that male oppression will go on incessantly until woman revolts it to stop that vehement masculine force. She strongly desired to get freedom from frustrated family suppressions. She wants to be a free soul like a bird who breaks the cage and freely flies in the sky. Her status is that of the calm that comes after the storm. She started her new beginning of her life. That gives her new existence and new identity for her life. Her decision can be appreciated without suspicion in the perspectives of Jean Baudrillard, a sharp critic of culture and contemporary society and great master of French Post-Modern Theory. As he states

"In the postmodern world, every mode of thought is totally acceptable and is considered as another way of defining a certain point. In other words, it is somehow bringing up a new kind of thinking. In reality, for every thought one must expect a strange tomorrow (Baudrillard, 1987)".

Nora's new bold step brought about a radical change in Victorian society. Even today her decision is considered a bold feminist act. Now, Nora is not as weak or fragile as the doll that Torvald thinks. For the first time in her life she gained respect and worth with her brave decision. Her existence became meaningless in Torvald's house; ultimately, she realised to question herself to know her true value. She wants to get freedom from everything that binds her soul.

II. Conclusion

Day by day, modernity touches every aspect of society. It has revolutionized the thinking styles of the people. Every house and every individual have been going far away from the roots of tradition under its influence. Though women might be greatly obedient to their husbands and family members yet they had to face lot of troubles in the family and society. Our Nora is not exceptional to that one. Nora is also forcefully moved away from her family. This pathetic condition of women has still existed in 21st century milieu also. Woman as an individual left alone to face the troubles of family and society. Nora boldly decided to lead her life alone. She strongly opposed all her past life that was not meaningful anymore. There is no place to show anger of woman in patriarchal society. Nora's anger was silent one but the door which was closed by her, created reverberating sound in male dominated society. That shows the defeat of male domination and it created frightening effect on cruel husbands. Nora's self-esteem was questioned intensely by her husband's vicious words against her. She could not forgive her husband anymore. So she left out her house simply and silently. It is customary to think in patriarchal society, woman cannot live without man. Nora challenges herself to live alone and also challenge her husband by taking a bold decision to quit her home.

Aftermath story can be presented in the film but not had been shown in this play and that left to individual perceptions of the readers and audiences by Ibsen. We can't easily forget the climax of the play. Nora is determined to overcome her inferiority and stand as a brave woman like a warrior. She is a feminist icon. A new era has started in the world of women with her. She is the epitome of modern feminism. She can stand as a prototype of strong woman who wins over all social institutions which suppress her soul. She closed the door on her past in which no identity for her. The slamming of the door forcefully punches our hearts. The fierce reverberating sound of silent anger of Nora would hunt every one of us who deeply immerse in the subject. It is like a sacred echo and a curse of a mild woman who suffered silently all over her life.

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