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A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF FEMINIST REVOLT AGAINST MALE DOMINATION IN  
HENRIK IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the theme of Feminism and its related issues highlighted by a Norwegian Dramatist Henrik Ibsen in his most wonderful play *A Doll's House*. His great emphasis on the importance of 'individualism' as against the vast majority of society gave him the distinguished note. His targets of attack were the decadent institutions of marriage, degenerated moral codes of public conduct. His greatness laid in inventing characters especially female characters that are more impressive and his grasp of female psychology. In the first draft of *A Doll's House* he wrote: "There are two kinds of spiritual love, two kinds of conscience, a man's and – a very different – a woman's. The play deals with the important theme of the liberation of the individual from the shackles and restraints of custom and convention. Nora who has remained passive and self-effacing for eight years ultimately asserts herself and hence becomes an individual in her own right. Nora has been a passive and obedient wife to Helmer, always conforming to his ideas, opinions, and tastes. Thus Nora has all these years been a "doll" and she has been living in a doll's house. But at the end she rejects her role as Helmer's doll's – wife and, forsaking him, goes into the world outside in order to have first-hand experience of life to establish her own identity and to discover her own potentialities.

**Key Words:** Feminism, individualism, liberation, custom, convention, doll, identity and potentiality.

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INTRODUCTION

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), a Norwegian Dramatist, is generally acknowledged as the Founder of Modern Social Drama. Ibsen's career as a Dramatist spans a period of fifty years. His creative period thus covers the second half of the nineteenth century. During his long period, he wrote twenty five plays, producing one play almost every alternative year. His great emphasis on the importance of 'individualism' as against the vast majority of society gave him the distinguished note. His targets of attack were the decadent institutions of

marriage degenerated moral codes of public conduct. In all his plays, Ibsen who scourged any bond that crushed individuality emerged as the champion of individual rights.

In Ibsen's plays the most striking feature was his criticism of Society. He has openly attacked the views and weaknesses of the people. He was genuinely concerned with social questions but he was more fascinated by individuals. In two of his most powerful plays, *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, he tried to show the relationship of individuals against a social perspective. The two significant features of his plays which distinguish him from other dramatists are *Characterization* and *Themes*. In technique and message his plays were greatly ahead of their time. His greatness laid in inventing characters especially female characters that are more impressive and his grasp of female psychology. In the first draft of *A Doll's House* he wrote: "There are two kinds of spiritual love, two kinds of conscience, a man's and – a very different – a woman's. They don't understand each another, but a woman is judged in actual life according to the laws of man, as if she was not a woman but a man."

#### **A DOLL'S HOUSE: AN ANALYSIS**

*A DOLL'S HOUSE* is the story of Nora and her husband Helmer. They have been married for about nine years and have three children. Eight years ago Nora had borrowed some money from Krogstad against a promissory note on which she had forged her father's signature who was supposed to obtain this loan. Her husband had critically fallen ill and the Doctors advised her to take him away to a warm climate. Having no money and desperately anxious to save her husband's life, she had raised this loan. Her husband had fully recovered. Since then, Nora has regularly been paying the monthly installments to Krogstad against the principal amount and the interest accruing thereon. However, she has never told her husband about the terms of the loan, and about the monthly payments she has been making, nor has she ever had any notion that in forging her father's signature she had committed a serious criminal act. Now, after eight years, Krogstad need Nora's help to save his job in a bank of which Nora's husband has been appointed as a Manager.

As Nora finds it impossible to help Krogstad, he reveals Nora's secret transaction with him and the fact of the forgery to Helmer through a letter. Helmer becomes furious with his wife for having been guilty of the crime of forgery. Nora is shocked by her husband's attitude and she had thought that he was capable of making any conceivable sacrifice for her sake. But rather she finds that he is a self-centered man. She also finds that he is incapable of living up to the moral principles which he always been professing loudly and emphatically. Her love for him drops dead and she leaves him and also her children.

#### **A DOLL'S HOUSE: A Feminist Revolt against Male Domination**

The play deals with the important theme of the liberation of the individual from the shackles and restraints of custom and convention. More emphatically it hints at the assertion of her rights as a wife. Nora who has remained passive and self-effacing for eight years ultimately asserts herself and hence becomes an individual in her own right. The play has an appropriate title as the word "Doll" which means a woman without any will or mind of her own, a passive and subservient woman. For eight long years, Nora has been a passive and obedient wife to Helmer, always conforming to his ideas, opinions, and tastes. He always treated her as a pet and as his property. His attitude towards her has always been possessive, as if she wholly belonged to him and had no individuality of her own. She has always accepted that position given to her by her husband. Thus Nora has all these years been a "doll" and she has been living in a doll's house. But at the end she rejects her role as Helmer's doll's – wife and, forsaking him, goes into the world outside in order to have first-hand experience of life to establish her own identity and to discover her own potentialities.

"Our home has been nothing but a play-room. I've been your doll-wife here, just as at home I was Papa's doll-child. And the children have been my dolls in their turn. I liked it when you came and played with me, just as they liked it when I came and played with them. That's what our marriage has been, Torvald." – Nora Helmer. (*A Doll's House*, Act III).

At the end of the play, Nora shows herself to be an emancipated woman, a woman who has liberated herself from the involvements of a domestic life in order to discover herself. There is nothing impossible or incredible

about her decision at the end which she discards her conventional ideas of marriage and declares her independence from her husband's control.

"In your power, all the same. Subject to your will and your demands. No longer free! No! That's a thought I'll never endure! Never." – Hedda Gabler. (*A Doll's House*, Act IV).

That was the time when wives were subservient to their husbands and when they could not question their judgement of their husbands. For a long time, Nora had obeyed the social code which demanded from her a complete subordination to her husband but a time comes when she discovers that in her relationship with him all the sacrifices have to be made by her and none by him. She cannot continue to play the *second fiddle* to a husband who has turned out to be ego-centric and conceited. She finds that all assurances of protecting and guiding her are bunkum and that his moral principles are shallow and fragile. Her action in leaving him is therefore perfectly understandable and justifiable. There is nothing Utopian in her trying to establish her own identity in this world. Her action is perfectly convincing. In fact, the whole portrayal of this woman is splendidly handled: *she is not a figment or the fancy but a real woman*. In her protest against her husband's possessive attitude towards her, she symbolizes the feminine revolt against male domination.

It shows us the sad consequences of the subordination of a woman to the ultimate control of her husband. The play focuses our attention on the conjugal life of a middle class couple and shows us the relationship existing between the husband and wife and the possible consequences of that particular kind of relationship. It also deals with the predicament in which a married woman finds herself an account of the excessive control which her husband exercises upon her; and it shows the method which the woman employs in order to get out of the play, and Ibsen therefore appears here as a dramatist of social realities. The particular social reality which engages Ibsen's attention in this play is marriage and the position which a married woman occupied in her home at the time when this play was written. Ibsen is definitely on the side of Nora, and she wins our sympathy also. Taking this aspect of the play, one can confidently affirm that *A Doll's House* is a feminist play.

#### ***A Doll's House: A Modern Tragedy***

Ibsen called this play a modern tragedy, and a modern tragedy it surely is. It is a tragedy because it has a sad ending, with Nora leaving not only her home and her husband but even her children, in order to face an uncertain future. It is a tragedy because it depicts the break-up of the family and the disintegration of the domestic life of the couple. It is modern in the sense it departs from the old style of writing tragedies. It is a tragedy in prose and in everyday prose at that. The play is modern also in so far as its message and its techniques are concerned.

#### ***A Doll's House: A Naturalistic or Realistic Play***

*A Doll's House* is a naturalistic and realistic drama. In fact, it is anti-romantic in character. Both the story and the characters are perfectly convincing, not improbable or fanciful. Nora's leaving her children might seem to be somewhat improbable, but if we understand Nora's character rightly we would be able to believe even this action of Nora's to be authentic. The play is naturalistic also in so far as Ibsen has rejected such play devices as coincidence and sensationalism. The story here is perfectly simple, and free from those intricacies which used to be a feature of the "well-made" play initiated by the French Dramatist, Eugene Scribe.

At the end of the play Nora is being far different from she was at the beginning of the play. She is portrayed in various relations: her relation with her husband, her relation with her children, her relation with the money-lender Krogstad, her relation with her friend Christine Linde, and her relation with an admirer Doctor. When the play begins, Nora is in her merry mood. It is the Christmas Eve and she has just come back home from Christmas shopping. She is in a carefree mood, and she is humming cheerfully to herself. She does not seem to have the least worry in her life. Even her financial worries seem to her at the end because her husband is going to take up a new, highly paid job with effect from the New Year day.

However, Nora, at the end of the play seems as a woman in a serious, sombre mood, making her exit from her husband's home, and going to face an uncertain future. Much has happened during the sequence of

the play and as a result vast change has taken place in her thinking and in her outlook upon life. Indeed, the change is most radical, and the one has not been expected in the least at the beginning.

#### **Parallelism and Contrast**

In the portrayal of the characters, Ibsen makes abundant use of parallelism and contrast, and he makes use of these devices in the development of the plot also. Doctor Rank has inherited his physical disease from his father, and Nora has inherited her moral deficiencies from her father too. If Krogstad is guilty of his criminal act of forgery, so is Nora, even though the motives in the two cases were absolutely different. Krogstad offers a contrast to both Helmer and Doctor Rank in so far as he has criminal tendencies, while the other two persons are moralists even though Helmer is not able to live up to the moral principles which he has been professing. Mrs. Linde offers a sharp contrast to Nora. While Nora is immature and somewhat irresponsible, Mrs. Linde has become mature and steady as a result of her experience of life. While Nora has hidden her secret for eight long years, Mrs. Linde would like the truth to be made to Helmer. In other words, while Nora has resorted to her secrecy and deception in this matter, Mrs. Linde is on the side of openness and truth.

#### **Technique**

Ibsen in this play has observed the three classical unities, the unity of place, the unity of action, and the unity of time. There is certainly a sub-plot, but it is so closely interwoven with the main plot that it does not in any way injure the unity of action. A noteworthy feature is the use of the analytical and retrospective method according to which the determining event of the story has taken place in the past, before the play opens. The play just opens before the catastrophe, and the preceding events are revealed to us through the dialogue in retrospect.

#### **Symbolism**

Ibsen has also made plentiful use of the device of symbolism. He makes use of several symbols such as the Christmas tree, the macaroons, the fancy-dress and the Tarantella. Each of these symbols imparts a deeper significance of the various situations. Thus we have two layers of meaning at several points in the play – the surface meaning and the hidden meaning.

#### **Conclusion**

Thus the play *A Doll's House* illustrates the moral and psychological need to exercise free will in situations where authority inhibits personal development. The play's conclusion is that individuals need to be responsible for them and exercise free will.

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