



## Deconstructing Cultural and Gender Norms in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

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ABSTRACT

Henrik Ibsen has been one of the greatest dramatists of the nineteenth century. He wrote many plays based on serious problems. *A Doll's House* is one such play of Ibsen in which he has deconstructed social and cultural norms by portraying a character like Nora, who develops her own personality, and leaves her children and husband in order to live own life and to seek her own individuality in an unknown world. She rejects the role of being the caretaker of her children and the slave to her husband and thus subverts the prevalent norms of the society.

KEYWORDS

A Doll's House; Deconstruction; Gender/Cultural norms; Henrik Ibsen; Subversion.

Henrik Ibsen has been a remarkable Norwegian playwright and poet of nineteenth century, casting immense influence upon the playwrights of nineteenth and twentieth century. His major works are: *Catiline*, *Love's Comedy*, *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *Hedda Gabbler*, *The Master Builder*, *Little Eyolf*, *John Gabriel Borkman* and *When We Dead Awaken* etc.

The present paper is based on Ibsen's most popular play *A Doll's House*, analysing the cultural and gender norms prevalent in the society at that time. Both Nora and Helmer, the main characters of the play, have been playing the parts of wife and husband perfectly. The former, caring and looking after the needs of her children and husband carefully. However, their smooth steering lives come to a halt, when Helmer comes to know about a misdeed done by Nora in the past. She had done so only to save the life of her husband, Helmer. But Helmer is not ready to hear anything from Nora. This incident induces Nora to leave her house, in which she has been living for many years, like a doll, to please her husband and doing tricks for him. At the end of the play, she gets ready to leave her house, and stop playing the roles of wife and mother. Thus, the playwright has deconstructed social and cultural norms by portraying a character like Nora, who has her own personality, and she has her own life to live. She is not only the caretaker of her children and the slave to her husband.

How significant the play *A Doll's House* is, becomes clear from N. Eakambaram's following words:

It was *A Doll's House* which made Ibsen well-known all over Europe. From

1879 when it was produced first, it took ten years or more for England, France and America to receive the impact of this play and Ibsen was no longer a playwright confined to Norway but belonged to the whole of Europe. (2007, p. 4)

The play *A Doll's House*, which appeared in 1879, invited much criticism for raising a voice in the favour of women's rights and defending the rights of wives and mothers. According to Fatemeh Ghafourinia and Leila Baradaran Jamili:

*A Doll's House* is a spotlight on the society when people are under the pressure of public opinion about masculine society. This play discusses social problems in general, and individuals' in particular, women are considered as victims and society as a victimizer. Nora, as a new woman, experiences victory, her journey to self-realization happened as a miracle, unexpected, uncertain, but on time. (2014, p. 426)

It is the story of Nora, who acts according to the wishes of the society and family for eight years. She has been doing everything for her family; even she raises a large fund of money herself for a health tour, which saved the life of her husband. However, there are some instances where Nora subverts her social role as a wife; although openly she shows herself to be a dedicated wife, who takes care of every word of her husband. For example, Nora says, "Just as you say (Ibsen, 2010, p. 5)", "I would never dream of doing anything you didn't want me to (p. 7)", "I never get anywhere without your help (p. 34)", and "I'd pretend I was an elfin child and dance a moonlight dance for you, Torvald (p. 43)". She dances, sings, performs as her husband wishes. On the contrary, her husband calls her with pet-names like "sky-lark" (p. 3), "squirrel" (p. 4), "little singing bird" (p. 5), "my pretty little pet" (p. 6), who cannot contend with the "hard world" (p. 14). Both of them keep on performing the roles of perfect wife and husband for eight years.

But there is something which Nora does not disclose to Helmer. She eats macaroons in spite of having forbidden by Helmer. She does some manual jobs to raise the money to pay for the loan she has arranged to save the life of her husband.

Nora: Yes, odd jobs – sewing, crochet-work, embroidery and things like that. [Casually.] And one or two other things, besides. (Ibsen, 2010, p. 11)

She does all this secretly from her husband because she thinks, "Torvald is a man with good deal of pride – it would be terribly embarrassing and humiliating for him if he owed anything to me" (2010, p. 17). But in the words of Abdul Baseer, Sofia Dildar Alvi and Fareha Zafran,

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 . . . the phrase 'manly-independence' is very interesting. Man himself is always endowed with this 'manly independence' but does not permit it in woman. (2013, pp. 627-628)

Man and woman were strictly defined categories in the nineteenth century. Nora is a spendthrift and likes to borrow money, Helmer thinks that she does not know how to earn. Therefore he says, "Just like a woman! (Ibsen, 2010, p. 5)", but he does not know she has arranged "Twelve hundred dollars. Four Thousand eight hundred crowns (p. 12)". On the other hand, he wishes a catastrophe to happen and he become her saviour, "Nora . . . many's the time I wish you were threatened by some danger so I could risk everything, body and soul, for your sake (p. 76)". Bjorn Hemmer aptly remarks:

Her illusory picture of the husband is valid only for some romantic-patriarchal dream world. The real Helmer is in his mental make-up much less liberated than Nora herself; he reveals himself as being a pitiable and egotistic slave of the male society of which he is so conspicuous a defender. It is not the human being in him which speaks to Nora at their final confrontation; it is society, its institutions and authorities, which speak through him. (1994, p. 83)

He threatens her to violate her sense of duty towards her husband and her children. "No religion, no morals, no sense of duty. . . (Ibsen, 2010, p. 78)". And, "You are betraying your most sacred duty (p. 84)". As she has done a crime by raising an amount of money by forgery. But, when Krogstad returns the IOU to them, he changes colours. At once, he becomes a sheltering husband who is ready to face any risk for the sake of her wife, "Here I shall hold you like a hunted dove I have rescued from the cruel talons of the hawk, and calm your beating heart (p. 80)". He pretends to be the protector of the family, but fails to act accordingly, when his wife is in real danger. Now, Nora realises her place in Helmer's house. She realises what she has been doing all these years, she says she has conditioned herself according to her husband's wishes, "You arranged everything to your tastes. Or I pretended to . . . I don't really know . . . it seems to me I have been living here like a beggar, from hand to mouth. I lived by doing tricks for you, Torvald (p. 82)". She realises her true role in the family. According to Razieh Eslamie and Hanieh Mazandarani:

A Doll's House represents a woman imbued with the idea of becoming a person, but it proposes nothing categorical about women becoming people; in fact the real theme has nothing to do with the sexes. Nora is not just a woman arguing for female liberation, she is much more. (2015, p. 101)

At the end of the play, Nora rejects the role of wife and mother, thus subverting the existing gender norms, prevalent in the then society. Earlier also, Nora not only plays the gender roles but earns money also to save the life of her husband. She thinks better as she is earning money like "being a man" (Ibsen, 2010, p. 18). She deconstructs the gender role of a woman in the nineteenth century to be a caretaker of children and husband. As Razieh Eslamie and Hanieh Mazandarani rightly opine:

Married women were simply expected to have children and run the home and certainly not to work at all. Divorce was fairly easy and inexpensive, but needed the consent of both husband and wife and Torvald makes it clear that he will never agree to divorce which should increase our admiration at Nora's courage in leaving at the end of the play: she will become wholly isolated from society because she has voluntarily left her family. (2015, p. 99)

In the nineteenth century Victorian age, it was very difficult to act opposite to the existing cultural and gender norms. Nora takes such step, so she was criticised for being a "bad mother" and "bad wife" who does not act according to her family's wishes. Such a step by Nora has been a beginning for the other, which makes the others help to seek their identity.

To conclude, it can be said that through the character of Nora in the play A Doll's House, Henrik Ibsen has deconstructed the cultural and gender norms of the society prevalent at that time. He has advocated the idea that the women can also seek respect and individuality in family and in society.

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