

## Self-Realization and Transformation of the Female Protagonist Nora in Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House

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### Abstract

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), one of the foremost celebrated playwrights and his best play *A Doll's House* (1879) shows the variations between the two genders throughout the late 1800's early 1900's and the way this difference affected people's lives. This play is all about the struggles of woman in establishing her identity in a society which is dominated by males. The play was written in a time when men and women were not considered socially or legally equal. Gender inequality can clearly be seen in the behaviour of the couple (Nora and Torvald Helmer) in the play. Torvald controls everything and everyone at home and he treats Nora as a *child*. He calls her his little *lark*, *spendthrift*, *squirrel* and so on. Ibsen acknowledges the actual fact behind such a behaviour, that in the 19th century life, women were limited only to their homes and performed only domestic duties. The target of this paper is to seek, find out and explain the kinds of women's issues that the protagonist faces in order to identify herself and describe the struggles of the protagonist in gaining independence in her life. The paper also shows the significant meanings behind the success of Nora's struggles and tries to bring out the ways through which women build individual forms of knowledge and self-expression, their expedition towards self-liberation in a very male dominated society.

Keywords: Henrik Ibsen, Identity, Women's Struggles, Self-worth, Self-realization.

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* expresses the theme of the rights of a woman and the rights of an individual person. Women have the lesser place in society than males. They have a position as wife and mother when they get married. They are expected to have children, do household things and nothing else. Furthermore, in salary, education and job, females are discriminated. The financial condition of women also relies on the males or their spouses. Women aren't free and equal; they can't get the jobs they want. The situation of women in the nineteenth century was in very poor shape. The society assumed strongly that "the situation of women was evident, she was always physically and intellectually inferior to man. This hypothesis leads females, politically and socially to become the subordinate class. Women were solely liable as a spouse and mother to their husband, baby and family. As a result, they

didn't have the right to choose their own ways. The title of the play on one hand symbolizes curtailment on the freedom of a woman and on the other hand it suggests that women are treated as dolls in the patriarchal society. The play is a critique of patriarchal prejudices and discriminations. It portrays women's status in the society and their treatment by men: the lack of true love and respect for a wife by a husband and the lack of justice and dignity in the treatment of women in the patriarchal society.

This play is all about the rights of woman. Nora Helmer, wife of Torvald Helmer, the director of bank is a beautiful lady who loves her husband and children too much. She happily caters to her family and is never demanding. Once, she secretly borrowed a huge sum of money for her ailing husband. She did not disclose about the loan to her husband as he would be stressed. She was happy to manage money for her husband's treatment. She was secretly repaying it in parts by saving as much as she could from her domestic allowance. Her husband, Torvald, always took her to be careless and childlike and called her his doll but that doll was mature enough to take care of her husband and her family. Appointed as bank director, Torvald first of all relieved a man who was once condemned for forging Torvald's signature. This man, Nils Krogstad, was the same person from whom Nora had borrowed the money. Here, for the first time, Nora's forging her father's signature is revealed and as a result Krogstad now threatens her to disclose her crime. Krogstad asks Nora to talk to her husband about not firing him. He tells her to be ready to face the consequences if he was fired. Nora tries her best to convince her husband, but Torvald asks her not to interfere in his business matters as he thinks that she was not able to understand all those things. He considers Nora no more than a child who is very far from understanding financial matters. Later, when the secret of Nora's forging her father's signature is disclosed to Torvald, he decides to disown her. Even though Nora had done it for him, he was not ready to understand Nora. For Torvald, forging a signature was a crime, may be under whatever circumstances and so he makes up his mind to disclaim Nora.

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* takes us back in the time when women were passive and their roles were limited as housewives. Nora, too, being a woman performed various roles as a woman, a wife, a mother, sometimes as husband's doll but was not free to even think as a man. She was totally under the control of her husband and somewhere in her mind, she had accepted that as her fate. She was happy in her own world until she realizes that whatever good she was doing for her husband and family was not even thought upon. At this point she realizes that she is not even treated as a woman and has no identity and self-respect. Nora struggles for her own rights that are not given to her by the patriarchal system. Nora saved her husband's life from serious illness and she was very happy about that. She believed that as a family member, she had the right to do anything to save her husband and her family. She had the least idea that her husband would not appreciate her act, the day he would know the truth. Though, nobody understands her but she has something to be proud of saving Torvald's life:

"I will show you that I too have something to be proud and glad of. It was I who saved Torvald's life." (*A Doll's House*, 12)

Further, we see that Nora's work at home is outranked and her husband's works outside is considered superior in all aspects. This condition brings the inequality in their household because as Torvald earns money can do anything but Nora cannot. He is the superior and has the power to control his family. Nora cannot spend a penny without Torvald's permission. She always lives a life in the hands of others. She was under her father's control before

marriage and after marriage under the control of her husband. She lived a stressful life as she had no freedom to take any decision of her own:

“I mean that I was simply transferred from father’s hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste, and so I got the same tastes as you or else I pretended to, I am really not quite sure which I think sometimes the one and sometimes the other. When I look back on it, it seems to me as if I had been living here like a poor woman just from hand to mouth. I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you wanted it like that. You and father have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life.” (*A Doll’s House*, 67)

The dominance of male dominated society can further be seen by other major character, Mrs. Linde. She also becomes a victim of the male-centric society. She too comes across many difficulties in her life. She did not get a respectable position and job.

Linde: I had to turn my hand to anything I could find, first a small shop, then a small school, and so on. The last three years have seemed like one long working day with no rest. Now it is ended Nora.” (*A Doll’s House*, 11)

Nora leaves Torvald and her family at the end of the play. This was Nora’s first step which shows her confidence in herself and her selfhood. It was a step taken not only against her husband but it was a step taken against the whole society dominated by males in all respects. She leaves her husband’s home with a bang at the door and that was an end of her marriage. Nora’s returning of the wedding ring to Torvald and leaving home unlocks the way for all women of the period to fight for their rights and to take a strong stand against male dominated society. The writer teaches them to be brave and to take their decisions to achieve freedom. Women must fight for their rights and in the play Nora seems to be a symbol of feminist fighter. She fights against the paradigm that woman is always feeble, helpless and incompetent. Fearlessly, Nora breaks the set pattern of the male dominated society and thus, Nora Helmer struggles for her rights. The play opens the doors for women to be aware of their rights and encourage them to take decisions on their own. They must encourage men to understand their necessities.

Thus Nora is completely disheartened with her husband. She changes completely and becomes a transformed woman. It seems as if she has been enlightened and she decides to get rid of her fancy costume which symbolizes her rebellion against the male-centric society. She speaks in a very typical feminist authoritative tone:

“No, that is just it. You don’t understand me and I have never understood you either... You must not interrupt me. You must simply listen to what I say.” (*A Doll’s House*, 157)

Nora is no longer ready to play her part as his “doll-wife”. She strongly objects about the treatment she received firstly, from her father and later, by her husband. These two important people in her life played with her emotions and always treated her as a doll and not as a social being with an individuality of her own:

“I have been greatly wronged, Torvald- first by papa and then by you... 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. And then I came to live with you... I was simply transferred from papa’s hand into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste, and so I got the same tastes as yours... When I look back on it, it seems to me as if I had been living here like as a poor woman- just from hand to mouth... You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have

made nothing of my life...Our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa's doll-child." (*A Doll's House*, 158-160)

This reflects how women are treated in a male centric society. Women are treated as playthings as if they are lifeless, without choice, determination and individuality of their own. Thus she expresses the deep hatred for the male dominated society which makes the life of women unhappy. When Helmer Torvald says:

"From the future it shall be different. Playtime shall be over, and lesson-time shall begin." (*A Doll's House*, 160)

Her deep hatred for the patriarchal society is visible in her response to Torvald's statement: "You are not the man to educate me into being a proper wife for you." (*A Doll's House*, 160) "... I must try and educate myself.... and that is why I am going to leave you now." (*A Doll's House*, 161)

Henrik Ibsen, here, manifests his feminist attitude by advocating gender equality in all spheres of life. Moreover, he subverts the life-long notion about women as weak, submissive and irrational. As Nora is completely disillusioned, her love for Torvald drops dead, and she leaves him and also her children:

"Never to see him again. Never! Never! Never to see my children again either – never again...Goodbye, Torvald and my children!" (*A Doll's House*, 149)

In the end, Torvald Helmer tries to convince her not to desert him but she turns a deaf ear to him. Earlier, Torvald was not ready to understand her sentiments and now nothing affected Nora; not even Helmer's pleading in front of her. She had become very strong and realized her self-worth. Slamming the door behind her, she walks out of his house as well as his life. The slamming of the door symbolizes Nora's rebellion against the male dominated society, it also symbolizes paying no attention to the demands of family life. She bravely takes her decision to rise above the false sentiments and affections and thus to open a new door of identity and individuality for herself. Eventually, Nora seeks independence and self-directed self-hood by breaking the restraints of gender roles of mother and wife. The play, thus, is a representative feminist play abounding with feminist beliefs.

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