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Gender Inequality and Love: A Critical Analysis of “A Doll’s House” by Henrik Ibsen

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Original Article

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Abstract

Gender inequality means men’s and women’s unequal rights and responsibilities. This study emphasizes the gender disparity in Henrik Ibsen’s 19th-century play, “A Doll’s House” under Beauvoir’s concepts about gender inequality in society that women are regarded as ‘other’ which lets women stay oppressed by men through the implementation of an erroneous impression of “riddle” about them. The findings reveal that the play focuses on a man’s treatment of a woman as his property and exploitation in the name of love. This play demonstrates how a man may torture a woman by treating her like a mythical creature at every turn. It also illustrates how men regard women who make decisions following their desires or will. When a woman wants to take care of herself, she is not safe in this so-called or nominal society. To take a stand for themselves, women are labeled as being unfaithful and are not given the respect and value they deserve.

I. Introduction

Gender inequality recognizes that men and women are not equal, and they do not have equal access to rights or opportunities. Generally, it is observed that a woman is a man’s property and to oppress her in the name of love is a legitimate right of a man. These views came into being by our patriarchal society that has been manipulating our minds since childhood. A woman is told by her society that she will have to serve a family, her husband, and her children in the coming life. So, her mind is manipulated by saying that she is fragile and unable to do certain things. She is not allowed to take higher education or find a good job as she has the only responsibility of being a housewife. However, the dominant behavior of man has been prominent since so many years. He considers himself a superior being to a woman and does not let her take any decisive step for herself or her own family. A woman is regarded as a foolish being who is incapable of resolute any situation as she is easily humiliated by love.

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was a well-known Norwegian playwright and theatre director of the 19th century and is regarded as a founder of Modernism in theatre. His life had a great influence on his works like, *A Doll's House* (1879) one of his renowned plays. Ibsen wrote this play in Germany where he moved in 1868. He was a promoter of feminism which is seen in *A Doll's House* (1879) but he did not admit it. His observation of the set norms of society can be analyzed from this work. He urged the people to think against the patriarchal society in which woman was treated as 'inferior.' George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), remarks that the Norwegian's writing lay in his having launched social-political conversation into the drama through the action of a villain-idealist and un-lady a lady (77).

The whole story of *A Doll's House* (1879) revolves around Nora who is a housewife. To protect her husband, from illness, Nora borrows a massive amount of money. She keeps her husband unaware of this fact and has been hideously paying it back in little installments by saving it from her husband's share. Her husband, Helmer, considers her irresponsible and childish, and calls her by pet names of 'doll', 'little squirrel', and 'lark'. Being promoted as a bank director, now he has to give favors to that person who was disgraced for copying signature fraudulently on a document. This person, Niles Krogstad, is the man from whom Nora has borrowed the money for Helmer's treatment. In the future, it is revealed that Nora has forged her father's signature to get the money from Krogstad. Here, Nora is humiliated by Mr. Krogstad who scares her by using the document having forged signatures of Nora. Torvald does not consider her able enough to know the value of money, so Nora hides this fact from him and tries to influence him. However, Helmer does not give her even a single chance after knowing about the forged document. He disclaims Nora even after knowing that she did that crime just for him. In the end, Nora realizes that she has no worth in Helmer's life and Helmer does not deserve her love and then leaves the house.

II. Literature Review

Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the earlier feminist philosophers, wrote a book in 1792 by the name of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which Wollstonecraft talked about the equal rights of women as an objection to the report that was presented in the National Assembly. According to that report, women were permitted only to receive domestic education. Wollstonecraft argued that equal education must be given to women to teach them how to contribute to society.

In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), by Jane Austen, Elizabeth, one of the Bennet sisters, perceives herself in a conflict between irreproachable decency and societal disgrace, where there is patriarchy. The stereotypical gender roles have been questioned in this novel.

In *The Forty Rules of Love* (2009) by Elif Shafak, "Ella realized the fact that life had carried her elsewhere, turning her into an assiduous housewife with three kids and endless domestic responsibilities" (6). To keep away her dreams of being independent, she fulfilled all her household responsibilities. It clarifies how a woman sacrifices her dreams to nurture a family. According to Akbar (2019), Ella's character is fragmented as for her daughter, she is the control freak Ella; for her husband, she is the hopelessly meek Ella and third Ella is just an observer who is waiting for her time.

Even in the rural areas of Pakistan, women are still treated as 'others' in the name of cultural norms. *Mery Hamnasheen* (2022), written by Misbah Ali Syed, under the production of Abdullah Kadwani and Asad Qureshi depicts that woman in the Pashtoon family are treated as inferior beings. Women are not allowed to go to the doctor due to the patriarchal society. Khajista's

mother loses her life while fighting her disease but no one bothers to take her to the doctor. There is severe domination of men. Women are just being exploited by the hands of men in the drama. They are only considered by men for the generation's production.

The Scarlet Letter (1850), by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is about Hester Prynne who sins adultery for the sake of love and is not forgiven by the Puritan society. She is asked to wear a sign of shame 'A' throughout her life. Here, we can observe the gender inequality in that no one considers it important to find her sinful partner and only Hester is humiliated in front of the whole Puritan society. In Akbar's (2020) views, Dimmesdale was a hypocrite who kept his silence, thinking about his reputation and career because he was regarded as a mouthpiece of Heaven's messages.

To the Lighthouse (1927), by Virginia Woolf also highlights the hysteria of women. We can observe gender inequality in the character of Lily Briscoe when she is haunted by Charles Tensely who says that women cannot write and also cannot paint, which distracts her from her works. The patriarchy influences her badly even though she loses her confidence.

Virginia Woolf outlasted the patriarchal beliefs when she wrote *A Room of One's Own* (1929) in which she highlights the status of women. It demonstrates that a woman must have money and a separate room if she is to write something.

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir highlights the patriarchal aspects by contrasting both genders' upbringing. In this novel, she informs how a girl is taught by her society to be a woman. According to Beauvoir, first woman's wings are cut and after that, she is criticized for not comprehending how to flutter.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), by Thomas Hardy, Susan is exploited in the name of love. Michael Henchard sold his wife, Susan, for the sake of money. She had no right to survive according to her desires. However, she compromises in the end, for the sake of their daughter but the daughter was also sold by her father. Resultantly, she forgave her husband and returned to him.

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) also discusses the theme of love and the issue of gender inequality. According to Aziz, Akbar, et al. (2021), this play employs a lot of symbols like 'a doll', 'house', 'stove', 'macaroons', and 'Christmas tree', etc. which present various situations experienced by Nora, the protagonist of the play.

III. Research Methodology

The present study is an analysis of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) from the perspective of Gender Inequality and Love. It is a qualitative research. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist activist and philosopher, outlasted the patriarchal ideology. The writer has challenged the set beliefs between men and women, demanded a change in the concept of a male-oriented society, and took steps for the liberation of women which was also the independence of men. According to Beauvoir's views, in society, women are regarded as 'other' which lets women stay oppressed by men by the implementation of erroneous impressions of "riddles" about them. To not help them or not to understand their conditions all the males make these excuses. These elements have been taken as the ground for the analysis of the play, *A Doll's House* (1879).

IV. Analysis

The play *A Doll's House* (1879) is a clear picture of gender inequality in the society of the 19th century. In the play, Nora is a true depiction of a male-oriented society where the distinct identity of women is not bothered by men. Through the character of Nora, we can observe how a woman is exploited by a man in the name of interim love without having trust. The character of Nora is a social construction of a male-dominated society where she is treated as a doll by her husband. Nora is pictured as a silly girl by Helmer. Torvald Helmer, Nora's husband, treats her as a child by calling her the pet names of 'skylark', 'little squirrel', and 'spendthrift'. Here, the focus point is that Helmer does not call her by her official name ever. We may observe from this point that he does not admit her identity or individuality. Now, this is a matter of thinking which is considered as love by Nora at the start of the play.

At the start of the play, Nora is demonstrated as an infant when her husband, Helmer, exclaims her as 'lark' and 'squirrel' when she returns home after shopping. At the same point, she wipes her mouth while eating macaroons as her husband forbids her to eat them. He regards her like a doll. Even when she asks him to see her shopping, he shows no curiosity and asks Nora not to disturb him. Firstly, he shows love towards her by calling her pet names and on the other hand, shows no interest in her pleasures. Despite showing interest in her, he calls her a spendthrift who spent all the money without any reluctance. Helmer also does not want to understand Nora as women are just riddles that no one can understand. Torvald Helmer is shown here as rational and emotionally cold to some extent. Even when Nora informs him about the forged signature and expects that he would take her crime on himself, Torvald proves her wrong by saying that his respect is more precious to him than anything else, even more than love.

Nora is considered inferior by Helmer. According to him, Nora is a childish wife and even she is called a child by her dearest friend, Mrs. Linde. Nora herself gives her consent to the fact that she has become a child and wife as well to her husband. He does not permit her to grow as an individual and holds her in a circle of his love. She is only limited to shopping and visiting the neighbors. The patriarchal society has a major influence here on the personality of Nora and she obeys her husband at any cost. She does so just because she is told to do so. Towards the end of the play, Nora realizes that their "home has been nothing but a playroom"; she was only her husband's "doll-wife" and previously had been her father's "doll-child" (Act III:90). She is treated as a doll and her father also used to call her doll. Nora is humiliated for the sake of love and does not prosper as an individual. Even Torvald claims that she is unable to understand the world where she is living but Nora realizes this fact later in her life.

As Nora is confined to her home, she is ignorant of the outer world. So, Helmer handles the public affairs as well as interferes in private life as he asks Nora how much she has spent on shopping for the event of Christmas. Nora is dependent on Helmer financially and has no means to earn. So that is why she was unable to arrange money when her husband got ill. Then, Nora commits the crime of forgery even though she is not allowed to borrow money but she did so in order to protect her love. This fact is also pointed out by Mrs. Linde when Nora discussed with her about this matter. She surprisingly asks Nora how she got the money as women are not allowed to borrow without the consent of their husbands. But Nora takes money from Mr. Krogstad whom Mrs. Linde liked some years ago.

It is worth mentioning point that women are exploited from all sides. Here, Nora is exploited not only by her husband, Helmer but Krogstad also tortures her for getting a good rank in Helmer's bank with the help of Nora. Helmer was going to be the new chief of the Joint Stock Bank

and was going to appoint Mrs. Linde as the replacement for Krogstad who had corruption before and was not able to hold his position. As Nora's husband is unaware of the act of forgery, Krogstad haunts her to disclose her secret in front of Helmer. Nora takes this risk of forgery just for her husband and sacrifices her comfort by not spending money on her needs. To pay the borrowed money back, she does several jobs of embroidery, and needlework, and also saves money secretly that Torvald gives her. But, the point to be noted is that Nora takes pleasure in doing so. She also tells Mrs. Linde that "It was a tremendous pleasure to sit there working and earning money. It was like being a man" (Act I:17). It means men must do their job and women are supposed to stay at home. In doing so, women are unable to realize their hidden abilities.

According to Farrell, in *Separate Spheres: Victorian Constructions of Gender in Great Expectations* (1996), women and men have their separate duties to fulfill, either in the public sphere or in the private sphere. It is women's responsibility to take care of the house, offspring, and also their upbringing. Women also play their role as guides to their husbands as well. If by mistake, they fail in their duties to some extent, only they are blamed. As far as the future of the offspring is concerned, it depends on their mothers. If a child commits wrong things in life, he/she will be related to his/her mother. For the judgment of this fact, we can observe Nora's life. When Torvald gets to know about Nora's crime, he prevents her from meeting their children. He shows incredulity towards Nora without realizing the reality behind her crime that she did all only to protect him from illness. Here, Nora realizes her identity as a doll that is unable to do something according to her will. She is the doll of her husband as she was the doll of her father. Everyone was playing with her and not understanding her emotions and likings. Here, we can say that the value of love is useless when a woman has no individual identity and has no respect for her values.

A woman remains always ready to sacrifice her happiness and comforts for the sake of love. Mrs. Linde works in the private sphere to support her family after the death of her husband. Before that, she had to nurture her younger brothers after her mother. So, she did not take any decisive steps for herself. Nora also took those steps which her husband recommended either to select a costume or to eat something like macaroons. She was not allowed to eat sweet macaroons by her husband which she loved to eat. Nora obeys Helmer just because he loves her for calling her pet names. However, Helmer even denies supporting her in her problem. Instead of supporting her, he gives her the title of dishonest and hypocritical woman. He even denies giving his children in her care. He allows her to stay at home but he would have no concern with her. This thing hurts Nora a lot and she decides to leave him by taking a step for herself.

The key point is when Helmer gets to know the reality that Nora did all this to protect him, he does not understand that. When he gets to know that Krogstad will not take any step against Nora and she and his honor are saved, he begins to show his sympathy towards Nora. He admits that whatever she did was for his love of him. Women can sacrifice their honor but men do not. He pretends that he has forgiven her and considers it a great favor towards Nora. However, the considerable point is to think of Nora's feelings. Here, Nora decides to leave her husband by telling him that it is necessary to become a human being before anything else because she realizes that his love is nothing. Helmer tries to prevent her from leaving in the name of duties towards her family by considering Nora, a mythical creature who has no feelings or emotions. She is a bird in a cage of marriage and is controlled by her husband to entertain him. This is what our patriarchy does with a woman when she wants to do something according to her will.

Through the character of Nora, Henrik Ibsen has pointed out the change in women's thoughts in that era when women began to think about their rights.

V. Conclusion

Consequently, it would be right to say that Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) does not seem a feministic play at the start. However, after a deep analysis of the character of Nora, the feministic elements are revealed. After discussing all the elements, it is concluded that women are not dolls rather they have their personalities and rights. Nora is a representative of some change in the patriarchal society and love is important to live a happy life but not more than self-respect.

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