

IDENTITY, ILLUSION AND REALITY: A FEMINISTIC STUDY OF HENRIK IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE* *

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores illusion of emancipation that may be created in a patriarchal system depicted in Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House under the theoretical framework of Simon Beauvoir's Second sex. The purpose of this research is to identify the elements of loss of women's self-identity in patriarchal society. Ibsen had a strong view on the issues related to women's lack of freedom of thought as well as of actions. The paper also finds out the confusion between reality and illusion as portrayed in the play. Tossing between the confusion about illusion and reality Ibsen provides some solution to the problem related to women's identity. This study focuses on the factors behind Nora's abandonment of family, leaving behind a question mark on the issues related to identity. This paper explores whether Nora's escape or her commitment to win freedom and independent identity just betrays or brings further illusion.

Keywords: Women's identity, Illusion, Reality, Henrik Ibsen, Feminism, Gender roles.

INTRODUCTION

The term feminism can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism involves political and sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference, as well as a movement that advocates gender equality for women and campaigns for women's rights and interests. (History and Theory of Feminism, n.d.)

The history of feminism can be divided into three waves:

- i. The first feminist wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
- ii. The second was in the 1960s and 1970s
- iii. The third extends from the 1990s to the present.

Feminist theory emerged from these feminist movements. It is manifest in a variety of disciplines such as feminist geography, feminist history and feminist literary criticism.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was one of the twentieth century's leading intellectuals, and most famous feminist. Inspiring the second-wave feminism movement in the 1960s. Simone de Beauvoir's "*The Second Sex*" captures the true extent to which women have been oppressed throughout history as a result of being categorized as the "*other*".

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The text of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* illustrates the issues of gender roles and self-identity. The researcher analyzed how Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* struggles for women's self-identity in patriarchal society. "Endeavoring to explain how this categorization has occurred, Simone de Beauvoir elucidates an evident duality in society: man represents the 'Self,' the essential, or the transcendent, and woman embodies the other, the inessential, or the sex". (Nichol, n.d.). For de Beauvoir, 'women' is a category imposed by society; women's selves, then, are also in large part imposed on them by society, and on her view women would do well to take hold of their claims to freedom and choice and thus reclaim their freedom and selfhood. Women are taught what they're supposed to be in life, what kind of roles they can or can't perform in virtue of being of "the second sex." Today we might express this idea using the distinction between sex and gender, where one's sex is just a biological fact, but one's gender identity is socially constructed. In 1949, this was a truly radical idea.

So how does this idea relate to existentialist concerns about freedom? One of the main questions existentialists worry about is how to achieve "radical freedom," or the kind of freedom that comes from making decisions in what Sartre called "good faith." These are the decisions that come from and express an authentic self. If someone is living in "bad faith," they allow themselves to be ruled by identities imposed on them from the outside. Their decisions do not reflect who they truly are. (Maguire, 2016).

The researcher investigates as to how and in which respect Ibsen's *A Doll's House* speaks for women identity and face gender politics in two different and opposite contexts. Under the theoretical framework of *Second sex* discussed by Simon de Beauvoir, the theme of their 'self-being' in fragmented, disturbing and striking impulses of modernity.

Statement of Problem

The works of the struggles for self-identity especially by the female writers are not easy to digest by the patriarchs. Women are suppressed not to speak for their rights and to celebrate their existence. Usually, women do not dare to write and fight for their rights. Women asking for their unique positions are not generally appreciated as they go against 'traditional gender role' and considered as 'bad women'. In the same case Henrik Ibsen's novel which encounters social norms and taboos finds out as resistance as she not only fights for other women but suffers political suppression personally. She openly resists and brings topics of desire, love, menstruation, motherhood, taboos, and cultural, social, political restrictions and restrains in order to resist against patriarchal values.

Research Questions

The Researcher attempts to find out:

- 1- What are the problems and issues related to women's lack of freedom of thought as well as of actions?
- 2- Which are the factors behind Nora's abandonment of family, leaving behind a big question mark on the issues related to identity, reality and illusion?
- 3- How Nora's escape or her commitment to win freedom and get an independent identity just betrays or brings further illusion?
- 4- How does the writer, Ibsen, dismantle the women's gender roles?

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research paper were to:

- i. dismantle the women gender roles in the patriarchal society.
- ii. identify the elements of loss of women's *self-identity* and representation of women through the feminist study of *Doll's House*.
- iii. find out that either transformation of Nora leads towards identity crisis or achievement of individuality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Number of literary works and researches on the gender politics and identity of the women have been attempted in eastern contexts. The feminist study of this novel may be different in its expression. In Eastern context if we observe, we find Kishwar Naheed, a Pakistani resistant poet like Henrik Ibsen. Her works like *We Sinful Women* is true representation of rejection of traditional practices of subjugated bodies, against the universal binary realities of men/women. She writes about sinful women/who come out and raising the voice of truth. Here we find the reversal of binary opposites as in this men/ women, truth/falsehood, a woman considered in negative and unprivileged strata represents herself as the preacher of the truth which is kept at higher level which the men belong to. Likewise, an Indian well acknowledged poet Kamala Das' poetry also identify woman a unique and complete identity. But, the themes of freedom and reliance on male dominant figure intersect. She confesses the strength and the valor of the manly characteristics. Her poems like *The Looking Glass* from *The Descendants*, the writer suggests women to give those things to men as 'What makes you woman'. The things and desires which are considered as taboos are supposed to give, the "musk of sweat between breasts/the warm shocks of menstrual blood" (Ikiz, 2005, p.14).

Moreover, if we observe other female writers who speak for women identity and raise voice against gender discrimination include Pakistani Eastern writer Parveen Shakir, other writers from different corners of the world raise their voice in western world too, e.g Maya Angelou and Sylvia Plath. Parveen Shakir's poetry discusses the shifting identity of a girl and her role as 'wife' and 'mother'. Her poetry is very close to Kishwar Naheed and Fahmida Riaz as in her poetic work '*Masla*' (*The Problem*), she writes her encounter with Fahmida Riaz and her dispossession from her works. Her Poems like *It Has Been Written, I'M Happy to Remain a Butterfly, Who Then Had The Time To Meet Herself* depict the issue of identity and their struggle to find their presence in the society and locate themselves as positive active individual rather than submissive stature.

On the other hand, Western writers like Sylvia Plath, Alice Walker and Maya Angleou also show loss of self-identity and struggle for their freedom. Maya Angleou's Poem *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Alice Walkers' poem *be Nobody's Darling*. Here both poets search for their own separate identity and escape from the social and political dogmas of the human society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper has been carried out through qualitative research method. The researcher finds out significant features of gender-politics and self-identity through the feminist study of Henrik Ibsen's literary analysis of her work *A Doll's House* under the feminist perspective. The Feminist study of this play helped the researcher to examine the writing in a relevance of manner. The researcher also analyzed it by using online journals, books and articles. For this purpose, different texts of the concerned writers and library sources have been used.

After that the findings and conclusions have been drained, and recommendations have been made. Conceptual framework is used for further analysis of the data. This study aimed at women's awareness about their repressed rights and resistance in social and political context.

ANALYSIS

Modern drama presents some real picture of modern world. In presentation of the stage realism modern drama positions the individual in the center. It expresses the tension and provides the information more about the society. If we search, we find Henrik Ibsen as a celebrity for introducing realistic dramatic action when play near to its climax. He is one of those modern writers who open discussion about societal issues in their writings. He is well known for domestic tragedies. It is the feeling of tragic life that gives drama of Ibsen a special distinction, the experience of missing something in life and characters moving gradually towards state of death apparently where character physically alive, but socially powerless and dead. In Ibsen's realistic world of modern plays, character struggles towards a goal but this effort leads out in vain. *A Doll's House* is the play in which problems related to female gender like women emancipation, their freedom of expression of thought as well as of action are discussed. The title of the play itself reveals the issues of identity and reality as Nora is a doll and her house is like an unfamiliar place for her. And Torvald calls her by pet names which demonstrate her inferior situation. As Torvald believes that a man has a big role in marriage, which is to protect and to guide his wife. He forces Nora to teach dance. He feels good to be Nora's savior, as he asks her after the party:

"Do you know that I've often wished you were facing some terrible dangers so that I could risk life and limb, risk everything, for your sake?"

We can observe here in this play, *A Doll's House*, people are entangled psychologically and sociologically in the web of society. Every man and woman is struggling for making his place in the society. By considering this situation, Ibsen sends Nora in the world with the demand that a woman also must have the freedom to be developed as a grown-up, independent and a responsible individual. Therefore, the protagonist Nora who is trapped in her life makes a decision for herself and escapes. Actually her escape is not a negative step of betray but she challenged the norms of society. She paves the way for all women to take a stance or such far-reaching step only for themselves. Ibsen has opened channels for discussion which practically deal with all the fundamental phases of human life. Nora's character represents a modern society of that time. She seems struggling for her identity and recognition of the self as she says to Torvald, "I must try and educate myself- you are not the man to help me in that. I must do that for myself." (Ibsen, 105)

This statement by Nora speaks of the individualism and identity as a female, but John Templeton in his article "The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen" uses R.M Adams's compliment which opposes Nora's idea to educate herself as a woman rather a person without any gender difference.

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, its real theme has nothing to do with the sexes. (Templeton, 28)

Torvald has a rational, imperious as well as even emotionally cold personality. He rarely spends time with his wife and children. All the time he remains busy in his study and has no interaction with his family. In Act 1 when his children return home after a walk, he says that "the place will only be bearable for a mother now" (Ibsen, *A Doll's House* Act 1: 23). He also portrays that his work and reputation is more important than her, as he says that "no man would sacrifice his honour for the one he loves" (Act 3: 94).

Farrell debates that the society determines public/private spheres for a husband and wife as “distinct, but complementary, functions to perform” (Farrell, 1996). Moreover, Torvald intimidates her “to not allow to bring up the children” for not “trust them to her” (Act 3: 86) after finding Nora’s crime. According to Guerin this “puts women on a pedestal but also in a cage” (Guerin, et al. 2011: 255). To the ending 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 3: 90). She had “merely existed to perform tricks” for her husband (ibid.).

But it can be overlooked that there are identical issues in the play as Torvald calls Nora by different names like “my little twittering” (Ibsen, 16) “squirrel bustling” (Ibsen, 16) and little soul. These identities take her far away from humanity and give strong animal identity. These false identities also create illusions around her. Thus, she herself makes the reality invisible, but one moment makes her realize about her identity and later, she searches for her identity more as a woman than wife or mother.

CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be concluded that Nora’s slamming of door does not give expression of escape and illusion. It shows the hope and bravery. It proves that Ibsen’s realism in modern drama makes the individual to see beyond the apparent illusions and situations. So, she leaves the home with motivation. By closing the door, she actually opens the door of realistic world for herself. She breaks the conventional rules and determines her own rules because it is not important to follow the rules set by the society. Therefore, her search for identity is not illusion, but a reality which is inevitable for any individual to prove him competitive in the world.

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