

MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP IN HENRIC IBSEN'S "A DOLL'S HOUSE"

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes an attempt to throw light on the man – woman relationship in Henric Ibsen's "A Doll's House". The Ibsenian man and woman are the representatives having origins in every locale and every time. Nora and Helmer of Ibsen are every time's and place's Nora and Helmer with different colors and shades. The way they act and react is meted out of time's constructed and modified selves across the globe. They do and undo everything according to the made selves. The manhood and womanhood, the masculinity and femininity are naturally unnatural as well as unnaturally natural. How far question of gender and idealism are significant to portray the man-woman relationship is also searched out in this essay.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Henric Ibsen's works have always appealed, as his work provokes the literary debates, not only readers but also writers of his age as well as in our age also. The literary arena, or artistic creativity in general is growing very wide and complicated because it provides us with the historical facts, legends of entire human kind and the course of transition in life from the ancient period till this very day. Man is exposed in literature as has conquered all the fears or obstacles, at the beginning, but slowly diverted its focus to man's psychology, feelings and experiences. In the courses of the development of civilization, the demand, taste or interest kept changing, thus the very subject matter of literary art continues to change. Exploring the relationship between literature and society, their interdependence as well as mutual influence may lead us into a very complex sociological study, which would only take us away from the essence of literary creativity and its purpose.

Ibsen has provided a human attitude towards standard principles, social norms and family values etc. in his dramas. He enriches his stories with crucial truth regarding life and man. The art of characterization, the insights of the characters, dialogues, their actions and the way in which Ibsen portrays women, their manner, desires and urges is apparently logical and naturally unnatural and unnaturally natural- thereby seemingly paradoxical. This unnecessarily become life like which gives Ibsen's writing an everlasting appeal. This play, not unlike his other plays, assembles the universal issues of male-female relationship, psychology of women folk thereby revealing the quest for true identity of oneself. In fact, this goes beyond the question of time and space in it by reflecting the problems and sentiments of modern man.

The very portrayal of Nora still drives the reader to discover its soberness, gravity and significance. The very ending of the play, which contains Nora's departure from her family, not only captivated the readers and critiques of his age, but also till today this action is

considered as a taboo in many cultures. Admittedly, literature reflects social perspectives, whereas the impact of the literature on the mass consciousness of the society exists as well, though appears weaker or slower. The emphasis that is given on the public moral concern has made the play more popular and thought provoking.

Here after having an analysis or justification of the actions of Ibsen's characters the essay would like to interpret the activities of the characters particularly regarding the relationship between man and woman. The very idea of woman's emancipation has been promoted by Ibsen, asserting himself simply an artist without causing a revolution in the male-female relationship. "He was intent on writing a drama which would highlight the anomalous position of woman in the prevailing male dominated society"¹. The writer concentrates on portraying the individual's psychology for upholding the family relationships.

Ibsen's dialogue, monologue, sequences on the stage help to create actual atmosphere thereby making us acquainted with the problems of both relationships and individuality. The events and motifs of this play have got such dimensions which are still majestic to the readers and spectators as well. Admittedly the present social circumstances are not similar to Ibsen's day but the relationship between a man a woman, to some extent, remained the same, just like Nora's yearning to find her own identity, leaving apart her husband and family. Nora's characteristics neither comply with Ibsen's contemporary women psychology nor with the modern ones, though they have something in common: they demand love, respect; they are necessarily in search of true individuality-which adds universality to the theme of the play. "With Ibsen's work, we take a large step towards understanding an evolving conception of modern drama" claims Quingley², thus classifying Ibsen as one of the founders of modern drama. This drama has evaluated its male or female as psychological beings.

This drama particularly deals with the male-female relationship formed after the marriage. Here we cannot but deny the fact that social norm and conventions mould the relationships concerning the role of a man or a woman in both the family and the society at large.

The foundations of contemporary family life seems to fall down as often Ibsen wanted to expose a different couple and above all a new mode of relationship, thus questioning about something which appears to be easy to understand, at the same time, which is never being questioned by anybody. Fundamental mode of relationships, the sensationalism- did not suit the contemporary trend and marked the play of its time. Apart from the criticism of the ruling ideals, the play moreover contains, according to Moi, "preoccupation with the conditions of love in modernity"³. Thus, the individuals, family or social structure had got a touch of change altogether.

Fundamental changes in the global society undoubtedly require some changes in people's perception of the world. If the readers find every revolution based on the rejection of former social system, inter-personal relationship or their ideals badly need reconsideration. Social and individual issues are incomparable and they are mutually conditioned. Moi also assumes that there are social and psychological impacts caused by love and relationships in the play and she believes that "the result is a play that calls for a radical transformation, not just, or not even primarily, of laws and institutions, but of human beings and their ideas of love"⁴. By claiming so, Moi actually emphasizes the tendentious dimension of the play and the writer's idea to use it to influence male-female relationship and the role of a woman in the society. Ibsen's ideas concerning changes mainly focus his modernism and revolutionary spirit. Unni Langaas comments on the play in the same way, and says: "With its critique of

patriarchal society and its radical scope, it has rightly been understood as a major contribution to the cause of women's emancipation"⁵.

Here a special significance is given on individuals and the personal quest for one's own individuality, but the same fact is that social conventions would inevitably influence the shaping of relationships and individuals in the society. There are changes in the relationship of Nora and Helmer, and they truly are worthy of being noticed. In this play he has created a Christmas atmosphere, so he could emphasize or over-emphasize the perfect atmosphere in that home.

The unintentional and seemingly artificial role of Nora and Helmer had struck the contemporary society. The couple leads a life as if they were puppets on the stage where there are performances everyday and everything functions very perfectly. Here the husband, Torvald Helmer is a protector, a dominating romantic hero, while Nora is a fragile, helpless woman who needs protection and enjoys that protection. "Torvald is a man with a good of pride" says Nora (Act-I, page-15, line-6).). Moi emphasizes Helmer's idealism in the sense that he carries the idealism of the play and at the same time develops the relationship of the two. "Helmer's idealism and unthinking echoing of it make them theatricalize both themselves and each other, most strikingly by taking themselves to be starring in various idealist scenarios of female sacrifice and male rescue"⁶. This understanding puts their relationship in a good situation and the principle of that relationship better.

Here the question arises – why the relationship breaks off, what happens to that perfect mutual bond. In fact, there are some particular situations through which they become attached with each other- Nora's initiative to help her husband, the signature forgery and all that followed from. That is the action; those are the motives, but not the core reasons for the change in the relationship. And the cause is that the relationship is not based upon some common facts. Rather on something different like free choice, self awareness and sincerity. Both in love and in marriage, the absence of these values may bring about two fold consequences- one is that people keep on playing their roles under a descriptive mask and another one is that the stage would collapse, the marks would fall off and the structure of relationship will be renovated. Although it seems that Nora is criticized more than others in the play, Ibsen also has put some subtle comments on Helmer's idealism, indirectly. Here Helmer is preoccupied with the ideals of beauty; whatever is ugly that can spoil Nora's beauty, is therefore prohibited.

He has always done something that is "nice". Nora is not permitted to do anything which is not sophisticated though being practical. After having observed some of his attitudes, Moi has defined him as an aesthician and idealist. His remarks as came to her notice, proves his social status as he thinks that "knitting is ugly because it is useful, embroidery is beautiful because it is a pastime for leisured ladies"⁷.

We find Helmer's view of love through his reflection on Nora and her notion about the marital relationship as far as idealism matters. Both his acts and his body language expose that bad things should not be talked about and the problems should not be mentioned; love should show positive feeling and hide those that are bad. To him, love is simply a game and in dance one hides his/her weakness with a smile. Being a man with principle he was consistent in his role until the end, even after the letter affair and disappointment with Nora, if only she wanted to continue playing her game. Notably, Ibsen combines characteristics in Helmer: in one hand, Helmer is showed as a dominant figure, a protector, a hero; while on the

other hand, a man who is unable to deal with any difficult problem or face the truth. Moi assures by saying, “Helmer’s refinement cannot deal with death and pain”⁸. Her comment is based on the illness of Dr. Rank which Helmer refused to accept. Unlike that Nora is consistently playing the role of a tender, vulnerable woman even childish, who at the end shows the vigor and confidence of a man, somehow takes over Helmer’s role. In the last scene of the play a decaying helpless husband and a potential brave wife who now starts molding the situation- a reverse picture undoubtedly.

Ibsen portrays his characters in a completely different style than on at the beginning, which among other things, suggests the idea of relativity in life. If we consider Nora’s character, her idealism, her love, as it appears at the beginning, it is clear that Nora’s attitudes like those of Helmer, is rather superficial in understanding life and relationships. Thus we are to analyze how it is a part of her responsibility; how much a product of upbringing and of a life itself-first in her father’s house then, with Helmer. The fact is that Nora as an ideal woman who in spite of being the product of her environment and even the people that surround her, accepted her husband’s idealistic point of view. This is how Moi perceives this problem: “Both Nora and Helmer spend most of the play theatricalizing themselves by acting out their own clichéd idealist scripts. Nora’s fantasies are variations on the idealist figure of the noble and pure woman who sacrifices all for love”⁹.

We agree with Moi on this very fact that, Nora, like Helmer, plays the role to satisfy each other’s needs since both were driven by idealism as a part of their personality that is their point of view. Nora considers her self-respect and self esteem to be in apex when, she could do something for her husband, saved a life. Even the corruption done by her becomes idealized in her mind, reinforces her sacrifice and thus her self respect as well. “The law takes no account of motives” browbeats Krogstad (Act- 1, page-29, line-10). It bears no fruit. Her self-respect, however, shattered and the idealism questioned when Nora gets the real picture of that very act and Helmer’s distressed mood and rage.

In “A Doll’s House” Nora and Helmer are not mere individuals; rather they are representatives of a typical, very frequently seen relationship between spouses at Ibsen’s time. In this kind of society the ruling norms determined roles to be played by a man/woman in both family and society. “It is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men and with counsel and judges, who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view”¹⁰. Theatricality, as seen in homes, unavoidable in relationships, is the outcome of the existing prejudices at the time, and it is the cause for losing identity and for unhappy endings. Thus it can be commented that the writer’s intention was to practically present the consequences of the relationship, of not facing the truth, and to show what position a woman should maintain to be away from a familial upheaval. This assumption is supported by Moi’s assertion that “by showing us their theatrical marriage, Ibsen did not mean to turn these two decent people into villains, but to make us think about the way we theatricalize ourselves and others in everyday life”¹¹.

In “A Doll’s House” Ibsen points out how the male-female relationships function, focusing the male-female roles played in society or family. It can easily be assumed that, social circumstances changed in both present and past times, but there is still the gender difference and is an end result of natural, biological differences. Uni Langaas argues that “my overall view is that this drama is not so much about Nora’s struggle to find herself as a human being, as it is about her shocking experience of being treated as a woman because of the acts she performs”¹². She further defines the play as a work demonstrating the effects of a system with

a clear distinction between gender and which puts a man in a much superior position in comparison to a woman in any sense- economical, social, political etc.

The differences between man and woman are believed as an act of God, and consequently highly respected, if not exaggerated. At one point of the play, when Nora vehemently expresses her resolution to leave her home, Helmer calls upon religion and a woman's duties. In answer to that Nora does not react and thereby clearly maintains a set of norms and an ideology.

Nora:- But I'm not content any more with what most people say, or with what it says in books. I have to think things out for myself, and get things clear.

Helmer:- Surely you are clear about your position in your own home? Haven't you an infallible guide in questions like these? Haven't you your religion?

Nora:- Oh, Torvald, I don't really know what religion is.

Helmer:- What do you say!

Nora:- All I know is what Pastor Hansen said when I was confirmed. He said religion was this, that and the other. (Act -3, page-82)

Moreover, she is not presented as a sinner, because her ultimate intentions are to discover her true self so that, in the end stage of her life, she can be a good mother and a wife one day. Two images are present in the play: one, in which men and women play their roles in line with the society and beliefs, where a woman respects the role she has on shoulder, but about which she does not think; the other, where a woman strips herself of the role and discharges the role as a human being, which disturbs the balance and brings about the gender conflict. As a result, the deviation from the way gender functions in reality leads to a disaster. In the end we are before two possible conclusions that follow: firstly, Nora should have never acted as a man and that taking the gender norms actually leads to a unhappy ending on both relationship and individual levels; second, that the discussed norms do not rely on what men and women practically are, and that they are grounded on prejudices.

Gender determines the relationships between Nora and Helmer, and the formation of their personality in general, while on the other hand, Nora's awakened and newly developed individuality influences their relationship and established norms of behavior. It is true that, she is a woman, but, beyond this identity, she is also a human being who does not want to live the life meted out of the environment. In that sense, this drama shows that the ideals of the social system are shattered to uphold human and his or her personal freedom. Tearing down the idealism, according to Moi, is the exact condition for Ibsen's "revolutionary analysis of gender in modernity"¹³.

Here, Ibsen shows well how well he understands the psychology of a man, a woman and the mechanisms through which human consciousness operates. Precisely because of that he projects situations of crisis, because that is where human's true identity reveals itself and a number of prejudices that dominate over the human mind are broken. At the zenith of dramatic conflicts, a semi-conscious followed by conscious conflict begins within Nora herself. Griffin emphasizes inner conflicts over the outer, which is a characteristic of a modern psychological drama, by claiming that "the real conflict at the heart of "A Doll's House" is not between Nora and Torvald, but inside Nora's consciousness"¹⁴.

Nora holds the father and the husband responsible for whatever she has done, as well as for the entity she has become. Quingley interprets this attitude of hers as "abdication of responsibility for her own actions"¹⁵. Finally Nora finds out what she is not, what life and the

surrounding people made of her; she is leaving exactly because she does not know who she is.

Does Nora represent a woman or a human being? Can this character go outside the notion of gender? Is it impossible? If Nora can be a representative of men as well, then the whole gender conflict loses its importance. Templeton says: “A Doll’s House” is not about everybody’s struggle to find him- or herself but, according to its author, about Everywoman’s struggle against Everyman”¹⁶. She represents the author’s intention to show the relation, that is, the conflict between a man and a woman in a given social milieu, which altogether determines and forms such conflicts. Her personal attitude differs from the quoted, and that attitude is that “Nora’s humanity keeps her from representing woman but not, magically, from representing people namely men, and women to the extent that what happens to them can happen to men as well”¹⁷.

The textual quotations are taken from – *Henric Ibsen: Four Major Plays* / translated by Jmes McFarlane and Jens Arup. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

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