



Nora's Doll Image in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*: A Question of Responsibility

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Abstract

Henrik Ibsen, the first major to write tragedy about ordinary people on ordinary situations has brought realism and radicalism of the nineteenth century in his ever appealing play *A Doll's House*. Maintaining an individual feminine personality is the main focus, the play deals with. The difficulty is personified by Nora, the doll of *A Doll's House*. She later strives to become a self-motivated human being in a male dominated society which is far more difficult beyond the imagination of a lady like Nora, the doll of *A Doll's House*. This paper aims to study the matter that Nora, the sweet pretty doll, not merely is a victim of the male-dominated society rather mostly a doll of her own mistaken identity. Along with the discussion the paper will also argue on justification of her leaving the house slamming the door after failing to discover the difference between fancy and imagination.

Keywords: Torvald Helmer, Nora Helmer, Male Dominated, Tragedy, Freedom

Introduction

During the mid-nineteenth century there occurred a new development toward realistic plays which were written in prose. This new development was to treat the modern life in a new way. Ibsen, who had formerly written rhymed plays, became one of the pioneers of this new realistic style. He is considered its first great dramatist. Soon after being performed at Theatre Royal, Copenhagen, *A Doll's House* created an immediate sensation and became the most frequently performed of Ibsen's plays in England and The United States. In Bengali theatre also, this play is statistically the highest performed play amongst all Ibsen's plays. Besides, it had to be printed twice within three months of its first publication. Translation followed in German, Finnish, English, Polish, Russian and Italian.

A Doll's House, a modern tragedy, is a masterpiece of compressed drama which was published in December 1879. Ibsen's supreme insight into the psychology and ways

of thinking of modern women, for which he is tremendously remarkable, has been obvious in this social play. "Ibsen's knowledge of humanity is nowhere more obvious than in his portrayal of women. He amazes one by his painful introspection" (McFarlane, 1970, p. 23).

There are tightly knitted three acts, very few characters and speeches, unchanging scenes and this play is a representation of a short period of time which works with a single plot and is believed to follow the classical unities. This play is jotted down on an ordinary middle class family, Nora Helmer, her husband Torvald Helmer, and their three children. Nora, the central and the most complex character of the play, is an attractive young woman married for eight years and enjoys to be treated like a doll. She acts like a "skylark", and "squirrel" to amuse her husband. She sulks, lies, squeals, behaves childishly and uses her feminine allure to gain what she wants or to avoid trouble. Very often her desires and needs are not her own but she is unaware of it, which contributes to her misery. By neglecting her own personal fulfillment, she pretends her life to be secured. This lack of self-awareness and her inability to recognize the consequences of her choices lead her to make poor decisions and to compromise her own happiness. However, while Nora Helmer is often viewed as a victim of the oppressive male dominated social norms and claims to get no chance to develop herself into an individual, a careful reading and closer analysis make our interest obvious to examine the area that, who is the most responsible instrument to be blamed for the tragedy of Nora's life and her doll image? The choices are very limited; either it would be the social context, where Nora has grown up, or her father and husband who are the members of the Patriarchal society, or she herself. This research paper will argue that Nora herself is most responsible for her doll image and misery and to establish the argument we will examine the role of these three options one by one.

Research Questions

This study has three research questions. They are:

- a) Is the society of Nora responsible for Nora's doll image? If yes, how?
- b) Are Nora's father and her husband, Torvald Helmer responsible for making her a doll?
- c) Does Nora have any share in her doll image?

Research Objectives

This study has two research objectives. They are:

- a) To find out how Nora's society, her father, and her husband are responsible to make Nora a doll.
- b) To discuss the role of Nora for her doll image or to become homeless for making

her own individual identity.

Research Gap

Research is usually done to sort out a problem or to open a new window for the individuals and society. After coming across many research papers, a research gap has been found. Very few researches have been done where Nora has been shown responsible for her own doll image and her unsuccessful marriage. Either the Patriarchal society or Nora's father and husband have been blamed for her doll image. This research will explore that, though Patriarchal society, Nora's father and her husband, Torvald Helmer are partially responsible for her doll image, Nora is the most responsible instrument and has the biggest share for her doll image, troubled married life and last of all uncertainty of her own life.

Significance of the Study

After going through the study a woman can learn how important it is to maintain an individual identity. This paper has shown that, though it is very difficult to survive in a Patriarchal society, women can stand and live on their own. From their real-life experiences, women can try to face the challenges with immense confidence and can make their life successful. Not only the wives but also the husbands can also take the initiatives to make their marital life peaceful and blissful. Couples can learn how to address various marital issues. Most importantly, from the study, submissive wives can be aware of their positions in families.

Theoretical Framework

The researchers have explored various theories for doing the research and focused on the theory of Simone de Beauvoir. In that feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir, he has presented a woman who finds herself living in a Patriarchal World and there she is somewhat bound to assume the status of another person. To get back her own identity she can challenge the norms of the Patriarchal society. To fulfill the objectives of this study the theory of Simone de Beauvoir seems to be very helpful and feasible.

Research Methodology

This research work is different from other studies as no data; interview or fieldwork is included here. This study is based on narrative, explanatory and exploratory analysis of the literary text and previously done research works. In this study, qualitative research methodology has been employed. This research has involved close readings of the original text along with primary and secondary sources that have been gathered from

diverse archival, critical and analytical works.

The nature of this research is only qualitative and narrative. Storytelling, interpretation of the meanings, analyzing themes and social contexts has been given importance in this explanatory research. The flaws and strengths of characters and relationships among the family members are highlighted. The research has come to the conclusion by evaluating and analyzing carefully the original text, primary and secondary sources from various aspects.

Discussion and Analysis Responsibility of the Society

While writing *A Doll's House*, Ibsen made the following notes about the play: "There were two kinds of moral laws, two kinds of conscience, one for men and one, quite different, for women. They don't understand each other; but in practical life, woman is judged by masculine law, as though she weren't a woman but a man" (Archer, 1912, p. 74). There was an abyss between the male and the female perception of the world and of men. In his notes pertaining to the drama, Ibsen wrote, "A woman cannot be herself in modern society. It is an exclusively male society with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint" (Ferguson, 1996, p. 44). Bhasin (2006) comments that, this play is patriarchal in its tone; that refers to male domination, the power relationships by which men dominate women, and characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways. Cobuild (2010) defines subordination as something else is less important than the other thing. Again, Gamble (2006), argues that in patriarchy, women become all that is not men or the image of unwanted male.

However, all commentators have not shared the same evaluation about Ibsen's society at the turn of the century. Laura Marholm Hansson, a German author, is considered one of the most prominent critics of Ibsen in those days and wrote several essays on female psychology. She claims, "... he has limited instinctive knowledge of woman. As such she holds no attraction for him; she is to him merely a concept and a piece in a board game. And he began moving the pieces back and forth" (Hansson, 1895, p.122).

After reading the play many of us may think that, Nora is a victim of social context. She has been presented in *A Doll's House* as an example of how society restricts the experiences and choices available to women and compels them only to think of their duty towards their family. But we get her as a woman who lives in an illusion of romantic love for a long time as a mere possession of her husband. The readers may even argue that Nora's society teaches men only to treat their wives as a possession rather than a friend or partner to share the feelings with. As we get Helmer saying, "I am not to look at my dearest treasure? -at all the loveliness that is mine, mine only, wholly

and entirely mine?" (p. 142)

However, in 1893 a booklet was published in Norway with the title *Are Ibsen's female characters truly Norwegian in kind?* In reply to the question of this booklet, Hertzberg (1893) a male author, answered in the negative and claimed that women in contemporary Norwegian society were much more free than shown by Ibsen in his *A Doll's House*. The female were enjoying the same rights as men. Another contemporary English critic and a prominent researcher on Ibsen Mary S. Gilliland (1894), comments that Ibsen tears down more than he builds up.

If we say that, vanity, distrust, deceitfulness, hypocrisy and refusal of thinking wife as an equal are the features of Nora's society, then we have to also admit the fact that, Nora's passive role and peaceful submission have helped Helmer for his hypocrisy, deceitfulness, unreliability and even his tendency of thinking wife unequal. When we look at the other female characters of the play then we cannot blame society to be the most responsible machination for Nora's doll's image. Rather questions arise in our minds, if Mrs. Linde and Anna are their own decision makers why Nora cannot of her own? Again, if we get Mrs. Linde, another member of Nora's society, as an advocate of truth, why Nora hides her secret guilt of forgery from her husband? In the play Nora answers the second question but the reason she gives is interesting. She answers that she is looking forward to using that event in the future, when she can no longer rely upon her looks. But how exactly would this help to restore Helmer's affections towards her? "One should not blame her society because the society appears affluent and agreeable enough for those who can operate in it successfully" (Kiran, 2022). Society cannot treat Mrs. Linde or Anna as it can treat Nora. Again if we say that, Nora is completely under the control of her society or if she is less of an egotist and more acutely sensitive to the society and other people around her, she would never gone ahead with the loan and Torvald would have died. She is able to undertake this because she likes to do it over any and all objections. We find, both Anna-Maria and Mrs. Linde gain experience and make responsible decisions about their life. While they are able to make their own individual identities in the same man-dominated society where male dominates the women, it is Nora, the protected daughter and wife, who remains inexperienced, impractical and romantic until this revolt. When she thinks something is needed to be done, she does it (society be damned). The loan, that she has taken, makes the matter clear that, not the society rather she herself is largely responsible for whatever she does, for her doll image and for the pleasure that her husband derives from her doll image.

So, from the discussion it is clear that though society has a role in making Nora a doll, it cannot be considered the most responsible instrument for Nora's doll image. Now it is time to turn to our second option that is Nora's father and her husband.

Responsibility of Nora's Father and Husband

In Nora's painful account to Torvald, she accuses of how her father and her husband, have used her for their amusement. She says that she and Torvald have never had a serious conversation together in these eight years. She regrets for how much she has been wronged by her father and then by her husband in her life. But our curiosity arises, "how much responsibility does she bear for what she is now desiderating? Why are Torvald and her father the only ones who bear responsibility for this? Surely, if she had wanted a conversation she could have initiated one easily enough at some point in the eight years of their married life together" (Gray, 1977, p. 24).

Marker and Marker (1989) remark to this situation by saying that, now she unjustly accuses Torvald and her father of having done her a great wrong by not permitting her to achieve anything, while she is now determined to strike a blow to gain her own independence. This is something many critics have found implausible. If we accuse Helmer for Nora's present situation, we have to admit that, he does so because of Nora's lack of openness as she fails to prove herself reliable and trustworthy and dependable to share anything.

Before her marriage her father has treated her like a baby-doll. She was under the control and guidance of her father and she could not help suppressing her ideas and ideologies. After her marriage with Helmer, she comes directly from her father's house to Helmer's with no time to form a life of her own. Helmer has begun to treat her as a kind of pet. His attitude towards her is always possessive as if she wholly belongs to him and has no individuality of her own and Nora also never shows any protestation against her husband's such attitude. She has only learnt to accept the guidance of men and left her fate in their hands. She has never tried to earn money. Her social role is to please and obey her husband and to bring up children. She has never tried to discover what she is really like. "Nora has never been subject only object" (Templeton, 1997, p. 127).

Nora's Responsibility for Her Doll Image

When we blame Helmer or even Nora's father for making Nora a doll, we cannot ignore that she herself has the largest share in her doll image. How much share does Nora has in her doll image, to examine that we have to look carefully into her character. Throughout the play Nora's endeavor of breaking the doll image is remarkably absent. Nora has failed to establish herself as an ideal mother, as an ideal wife or even as an individual identity, rather she appears as an superficial woman, a liar, a spendthrift, a feather-brain, and so on. Whether she is the most responsible person to be blamed for her failure or she herself is happy with all these epithets after her

name, is a question of study.

Nora never tries to come out of her doll image throughout the play. Even after all these, she accepts Helmer's judgment because she wishes to please him only without trying to hear her own inner voice. Nora admits, "I am in the power of a scoundrel; he can domineer over me as much as he likes, and I must submit" (p. 155).

She hides her identity of a true realistic woman for her weak personality who can take major decision and risk of forgery only for saving her husband's life when he was severely ill or a risk of forgery and challenge of repaying such a large loan. It is not possible for any doll wife who is not truly practical. Her realistic outlook is also evident when Nora cares of her husband, children, her servants and Dr. Rank. In the last act of the play Nora amazes Helmer by talking seriously breaking her doll image. She hides her practical outlook from all till the end of the play. From the beginning, Nora's escapist tendency is noticeable as she has not guts to face the reality. She acts like a good actress, pretends to be fit in her part and these have led her increasingly into dishonesty. Because of her tension between her real life and her role as a doll, she dreams of improbable romantic solutions to her problems and when this fails she thinks of committing suicide. Nora's escapist tendency is culminated when she hides the loan taken from Krogstad till Krogstad discloses it to Helmer by sending a letter. If she had revealed it herself in a most convincing way, Helmer would not have reacted in such a terrific way. She has waited for the miracle forgetting that no one will play the miracle; she herself must play the miracle to change her life.

Nora's love is based upon a mistaken notion. Nora does not try to know about romantic love while Helmer's love is blinded by ideas of love. Nora knows that Helmer loves her for being pretty and amusing. Helmer's love for Nora is based on physical charms rather than her other qualities. Nora knows it very well that, it is not Helmer's love which brings him close to her rather her charms which attracts and amuses him.

She has a pretend marriage; neither Helmer loves Nora nor Nora loves Helmer but both pretend to love one another. Apparently, Nora tries to cope up with Helmer and accepts all the principles of Helmer. Nora's declaration to Mrs. Linde of not even thinking of doing what her husband disapproves of, has been revealed as a false by her act of forgery and debt that is without Helmer's knowledge. Mrs. Linde asks Nora for a favor to get a job and Nora assures her to lead up to it beautifully as she knows how to put him in a good humor. "I shall lead up to it beautifully! – I shall think of some delightful plan to put him in a good humor!" (p. 41). She claims to Mrs. Linde to have some control over her husband and she claims to have this over Krogstad also. But again just after few moments she admits the truth, reveals the real thing, "... I have no influence-absolutely none" (p. 65). That truth proves her a doll wife, a lifeless thing. To keep this fake love Nora humiliates herself by pretending to be helpless, by lying and other acts which suppress her true feelings. She understands that if Helmer knew of this secret guilt of forgery, it would affect their

marriage. She tries heart and soul not to hurt his proud image as he is the head of the family. She says, "And besides- how painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly self-respect, to know that he owed anything to me! It would utterly upset the relation between us; our beautiful, happy home would never again be what it is" (p. 46).

Thus, being fully aware of the fact that the secret will destroy his love for her, she takes refuge in a self-generated fiction that, Torvald will be transformed into a romantic hero of her dreams and will take the guilt of the forgery on himself to save her. Thus, the problem will be solved. But surprisingly, Helmer takes his conventionally honorable standpoint which is on the sides of law and sees the situation with male eyes. For her doll image she cannot understand that, the home is never hers rather she is a doll in it. "It's a manifestation of Nora's inability to think intelligently about what is happening-like so many passionately tragic figures, the more complicated and out of control the situation gets the blinder she gets to what is really going on" (Thomas, 1983, p. 38).

Nora is a spendthrift prodigal and she likes to waste money. We see it in the opening scene when she gives a generous tip to the porter. "... the first thing we see her do is give the porter an over-generous tip" (Engels, 1940, p. 7). She has a habit of borrowing. She does not care for the creditors as they are strangers in her view. She spends money though they cannot afford to squander. For Nora, "They! Who cares for them? They're only strangers" (p. 25). But Helmer's philosophy regarding borrowing and debts is that, "Home life ceases to be free and beautiful as soon as it is founded on borrowing and debt" (p. 25).

Nora is a superficial character who does not like to be a woman of flesh and body. She does not know the seamy side of life. Mrs. Linden also comments on her little knowledge of the troubles and burdens of life. "Doubly good in you, who know so little of the troubles and burdens of life" (p. 41). Like others Mrs. Linden thinks her unfit for any serious job as she has never presented herself to do anything serious.

Nora pretends to be a caring mother though she never tries to be one, treats her children as her doll, plays with them. After the revelation of forgery she shrugs off her thoughts, thinks her affection or company will spoil them, leaves them slamming the door behind her. She assumes that, they are in the better hand. She forgets that there is no replacement of a mother. She does not think whether it would be justified to abandon the children or not. She suddenly starts bothering about her own individual identity rather than her identity of a mother, forgetting her responsibilities to the children, she leaves the house only to look for her own identity. "Nora's exit serves no reasonable principle; it is a radical assertion of her own egocentricity, an ultimately selfish act" (Kaufman, 2000, p. 25). Promise to the children in her behavior is absent and this proves her aloofness from the far bare reality.

Nora is a doll wife who is completely unaware of her own worth until the last act of the play and initially appears flighty and excitable. Ystad (1997) remarks on her leaving

the house that, she may appear happy enough and getting her way, but she's playing a silly role, acting the child-wife when she is, in fact, a mature married woman and mother in her late twenties.

Throughout the play Nora does not show any such serious and reliable act for which anyone can depend on her, she never does anything serious to break up the doll image with Helmer. Krogstad's statement— "I don't think he is anymore inflexible than other husbands" (p. 65) proves that wives had some influence over their husbands even in Ibsen's society; Nora did not have any influence over her husband. Moreover, Helmer constantly refers her with pet names, such as "singing lark", "little squirrel" and "little spendthrift", none of them gives any positive impression about her. He pats her on the head much as one would a favorite puppy and Nora never protests against such behavior as she is happy with her doll-wife identity. She wants to be an ideal wife without maintaining an ideal husband-wife relationship where spouses share each and every single matter. Mrs. Linde's saying of sharing everything is one of the most important conditions of an ideal marriage makes Nora amazed. Without knowing what an ideal marriage is, she wants to be an ideal wife.

Nora's impractical outlook and ignorance of the real world compel her to believe that she has not done wrong in forging her father's signature to obtain money. She does not believe that the law can punish her or Krogstad can do anything to disrupt her comfortable family life that has been actually built on lies which is somewhat ironical. Johnston (1989) describes Nora by saying that, she thinks that if society's rules indicate that something she has done is wrong, then society itself must be at fault. Again Nora's decision to leave her family taking a considerable risk at the end of the play what Helmer, considers "violent" and "rash decision", proves her having no idea of what is right and what is wrong. Natural feelings on the one hand and belief in authority on the other, lead her to utter destruction. She cannot understand the world outside her house is often ruthless and does not submit to tears, airs of superiority or romantic notion of duty. After all, males in the 19th century Europe dominated not only the home but also the workplace. Moreover, a woman who declares her independence from her family is little esteemed by society. Taking into consideration the social attitudes of Europe of Ibsen's time, Nora cannot even think of what is waiting for her. "Her exit, thus, is much more a self-destructive assertion of her uncompromising and powerful ego, a necessary expression of her romantic quest for freedom, than it is an intelligently earned insight into how best she can learn to function as an individual amid a conforming and oppressive society" (Johnston, 2000, p. 37).

Aarseth (1997) describes Nora as a woman who in the end is leaving her husband and three small children, in order to see for herself what society is really like, and questions whether the play present true picture of contemporary society.

Nora's decision not to disclose the secret of forgery to her husband, ignoring Mrs. Linde's suggestion to disclose it, reveals Nora as a silly woman. She cannot think that

Krogstad will inform her husband about the loan and blackmail her. For her lack of practical knowledge she does not know how much she has paid when a businessman should know of his business. "Isn't it? I daresay not. I don't know. But don't let us think of business – it's so tiresome" (p. 52).

Nora's declaration of not caring about the society to Dr. Rank is suspicious. She expresses to Dr. Rank, "What do I care for your tiresome society?" (p. 55). But we see that she follows and acts her social roles of being a good wife without any honesty in the relationship, her role as a mother without any duty to do. Till the end of the play, we see Nora has never made a free choice with full knowledge hearing the echo of her own mind.

She is very indifferent of her freedom of choice, self-recognition of her needs and knowledge of what she is doing. When Helmer does not play a miracle, Nora sees clearly the falsity of her life; she loses her faith in him. She wants freedom to develop herself, freedom to become an individual, freedom to do what she feels she must do. She has no sense of social obligations, community or political reform. When Helmer calls upon her sacred duty towards husband and children and asks her what people will say, Nora replies, "I believe that before all else I am a human being ..." (p. 167). She can no longer believe in what people say and has no faith in the law, religion, conscience and morality. She wants to "be perfectly free" after eight years of her marriage. After the revolt she discovers that her life has been a child's game of make-believe. She realizes that she is living with someone she does not understand and respect. Suddenly she casts off years of mask.

It is Krogstad's letter which becomes a miracle. If Krogstad had not written the letter Nora would not have tried to find out her identity as she has never felt any urge to find out her identity. Without the letter she would have remained a doll for the rest of her life. She could not understand her husband and even her soul; she would have been living in the world of the dolls as she was living in the past years closing her eyes to the outer world, to the reality, to the bottom of her heart. She fails to understand that this house is not her own. Rather she acts like a puppet, wearing mask and pretends to be happy and ideal wife sacrificing whole of her life. She thinks that she is under the shield of broad wings of her husband ignoring the necessity of being emancipated. "– That was the miracle that I hoped for and dreaded. And it was to hinder that that I wanted to die" (p. 171).

Nora proves to be a failure not only as a wife but also as a daughter. The play suggests that, to protect parents, children are obligated. As a daughter Nora has recognized this obligation but ignores it choosing to be with her husband instead of her sick father. In contrast, Mrs. Linde has deserted Krogstad leaving her hopes of being with Krogstad and shouldered years of labor for her mother and siblings. She has left her former lover and married a man for financial support as her mother was bed-ridden and had two younger brothers to look after. "My mother was still alive, you see, bed ridden and helpless; and then I had my two younger brothers to think of" (p. 39). We find Mrs. Linde as a true fighter whereas Nora is afraid of fighting.

Moreover, when Mrs. Linde has lost her purpose of living as she has become free of the familial obligations and does not have anybody to earn for, Nora ignores the reciprocal matters of filial obligations. Thus, when we compare Nora to Mrs. Linde and Anna, she appears to be a self-victimized doll who does not protest against her husband's any attitude who thinks his wife a complete "feather-brain". The faults in her character make our minds in further thinking that Nora is not a complete victim of the society or her father or husband who leads her to her tragic sufferings and Nora is responsible for her final destruction.

Conclusion

Freedom cannot be purchased; it is not a gift which can be given by anyone. One has to earn it to enjoy it. Freedom is a birth right, no one wants to be governed by others but our Nora wants. Like a doll; freedom does not make any urge in Nora. Nora is happy with her dollish image, and is very much confused of the meaning of freedom and life. Freedom means to her an opportunity to devote herself fully to the domestic responsibilities. She eventually learns that it is not debt that enslaves, but her husband's unbending will. Again, after Krogstad blackmails her, she reconsiders her conception of freedom and questions whether she is happy in the doll's house, where she is treated like a doll and subjected to his orders and edicts. By the end of the play, Nora wishes to be free from all obligations in order to purchase her own ambitions, beliefs and identities. Nora seeks real freedom, realizing the truth that a doll's house can never be a real home.

She has failed to realize the matter that, society will not change itself rather it is us who have to change it. When *A Doll's House* was considered "... to be a feminist tract, rather than a study of self-realization and vocation to truth, Ibsen protested that he was a poet-playwright, rather than a social reformer" (Rahman, 1997, p. 22). Nora has failed to discover her own identity and her freedom. Upon everything she has victimized herself and she is a victim of her own, has made the situation to be oppressed by the society at first and then by her father latter on by Helmer. We cannot deny the truth that though all have their share for her doll image but her own share in it is the most crucial one.

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