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A Feministic Approach to Nora of Henric Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

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ABSTRACT

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen is a significant work as a model play in the rise of feminism of 19th century. Nora, the central female character, acts as the harbinger of feminism here. She is seen in the play as a rebellious female for establishing her own recognition as a human being. She discovers herself as a locked bird in both her father's house and husband's as well. She also proves that in the name of love and adoration she receives only humiliation from the male dominated families. So she leaves her "happy home" for uncertainty as well as she leaves the community of her own people. Actually, Nora is the representative of the pioneering female world who tried to change the male dominated social systems and to change their discriminatory outlook to the womanhood. So this study is to find out the seeds of feminism in the women waiting to be flourished with an explosion of freedom in the 19th century.

Keywords: Feminism, Doll's House, The Duches of Malfi, Nora of Henric, and Classical Literature.

INTRODUCTION

From the unequal treatment of women worldwide, the feminism has been introduced. Feminism is a movement, a set of beliefs that complicates gender inequality. Feminists believe that women have been assistance through men's greater power. They value woman's life and concern and work to develop woman's status. In the 19th century, there prevailed a wave of feminism in literature which is vividly visible in Nora. Nora is an age concerned girl of the nineteenth century society. She is the main properties in the play *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen. She is regarded here as a revolt to her society. She is seen in the play leaving her husband and children in quest of her own identity.

She believes in her own freedom. Before her marriage her father brought her up as a love-child. After her marriage she is treated same by her husband as a lovely bird. But she is not satisfied with it. So it is our aim here to show that through Nora's struggle against the adversity of life, she wants to be evaluated same as a man through her fitness which is the main message of feminism. In order to come out successful in this attempt, I have chosen some documentary books on the important commentaries and interpretations. Books on comments, magazines, newspapers, and other publications have been chosen as the helping sources (Ramazanoglu, Caroline, 1989). The discussion on feminism begins with an

acknowledgement of women's inequality, oppression, subordination and they require changing the situation and improving the quality of women's lives. Ramazanogola comments: "Feminism is not only a social theory but also a political practice. Although Feminism contains the question of women's inequality as central to all ideas, the tonics and the causing influence of society on women's manumission are all open to dispute" (Wolf, Noami. 1994).

The discussion on feminism begins with the inequality, oppression, subordination of women and the need to replace the situation and develop the quality of women. "There are excellent causes for thinking that women suffer from systematic social prejudice because of their sex" (Richards 13-14, 1980). Rowbotham suggests: "Feminism is a movement against hierarchy, which goes beyond the liberation of sex. It contains the possibility of equal relation not only between women and men, but between men and men, women and women and even between adults and children". Again, Bell Hooks (1987) emphasizes the wider implication of feminism as: "A radical movement that would eradicate domination and transform society, Feminism, therefore, marks a commitment to recognizing society so that self development of people can take".

Though the feministic movement came to literature towards the 19th century in full swing, its flow is seen in the previous literature as well. Even this influence has been noticed from the very starting of the literary trends of the classic age. It has been flourishing to the present literature. In the western two epic *Illiad* of Homer and *Aeneid* of Virgil, two central female characters Helen and Dido. Besides Homer, the character of Helen is also present in the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. All of them have taken different outlook to the portrayal of this character. Among them, Aeschylus has criticized this character much. He has noticed that this character has an affinity with the term "Hell". In his *Agamemnon*, he has illustrated her sin which is not pardonable. She has been depicted

as a symbol of evil. Her world renowned beauty has been rejected by Aeschylus like Homer. Sophocles is somewhat soft in his design of Hellen. She is much alive in the play of Euripides. In *Illiad*, Helen's most attractive side is her humanly nature. When she protests the autocracy of the heavenly gods, she is regarded as the human revolt by the readers. From this speech Hellen has been proved as an unpredictable lady who does not surrender to the circumstances. Later we see her expecting death. In short, Homer has drawn the helplessness of human being through his epic. *Aeneid's* central character is Dido of Virgil. Virgil has followed Homer in creating *Aeneid* but not Dido. Dido is quite different from Hellen. She is alive in response to her beauty. In the first entrance, Dido arrives as a royal lady. She is compared with the goddess Diana. Like Hellen, Dido gets love proposal first and suffers severely later (Rowbothan, 1985). She is married to Sycas who is a rich man. But her brother Pigmillion kills him out of greed for wealth. Her second love comes to her with Aenius. She enjoys this love heartedly. But because of hatching plot by the gods against her love, she is to be separated from Aenius. She becomes broken-hearted and stands before Aenius at the time of his departure and scolds him as Traitor. Last of all she commits suicide to hide her sufferings.

Again we notice two rebel women the age of renaissance. In the patriarchal society of Europe, women were suppressed tremendously. They were confined to the household activities only. They were expected that they would be innocent and chaste always. If they would have lost their virginity, they were chained or killed. In the two plays- *The White Devil*, and *The Duchess of Malfi* of John Webster we see two ladies who believe in the freedom of their love and soul. These two ladies are Victoria and *The Duchess of Malfi*. They act as the representatives of the suppressed ladies of the age who gradually protest against the ruling systems of the patriarchal society. Once they become two rebel ladies and challenge the customs of the day. By evaluating the characters, we should get idea about the social tradition of that age. In the

white devil we see that social tradition has entrapped Victoria with marriage. At the same time she is taken to the power by this marriage. She is sold by her father to an old man in the name of marriage. Gayle Greene comments, her marriage with Comillo is funny and unacceptable. But this does not allow her illegal relation with brachiano. Her brother Flaminoe uses her illegal liaison for his own purposes.

In the play *The Duches of Malfi*, Duchess is also a very powerful lady. But her two brothers Fardinand and Cardinal are below in rank. So they were only busy in demolishing her diguity. They have raised question about the validity of her second secret marriage. Later we see he wants to kill her as revenge. The crazy and revengeful attitudes of the two brothers have acted as the cruel judges. They have set the madmen near her house. They have killed her husband and her sons. Lastly, she was also killed. Duchess protest their patriarchal society by marrying the steward of her house secretly inspite of the prohibition of her brother.

In the eighteen century, the writings of Jane Austen are the reflection of feminism. It is said that feminization of the English novel has been started from the writings of Jane Austen. Women concerning matters have been the chief attraction of her writing. In her six novels we notice that the main characters are beautiful girls who are waiting for wealthy husbands. Because in that society the daughters were deprived of the wealth of parents. So they were to hanker after the wealth of husband for their economic support. In Jane Austen's main work *Pride and Prejudice*, we notice Mrs. Bennet who is highly anxious for her five unmarried daughters about their uncertain future. She is really a realistic character though her words are the source of daughter. She is a beautiful lady with less knowledge. Her main aim is to give her daughters in marriage with the wealthy persons. They have no male child in the family. So their wealth will give to any near relative. She is restless thinking it. So her main business is to find out suitable husbands for her daughters. In the opening we see she is giving

and important message to Mr. Bennet about the rent of the Netherfield Park by a young unmarried wealthy person of the North-England named-Mr Bingley. She is expecting that Binley will marry one of her daughter's certainly. In this feministic novel Mrs. Bennet is quite satisfied at the end of the novel in her mission to give her daughters in marriage with the wealthy husbands. Another age concerned lady of the Victorian age is Tess of Hardy's *Tess of D'Urbervilles*. In designing this character the writer became so sensitive and careful.

In the story, we see that Tess has been raped in a dark forest of the night though she was in deep sleep and tiredness. After being raped, Tess has got a new look to Hardy. Hardy believes that though Tess has lost her virginity, she is still a pure woman. Because the nature will replenish her loss. It is the natural call to every man and woman. But Victorian society did not support the view. In the nineteenth century, Henry Jameson gave attention to the womanly freedom through his character Isabel in *The Portrait of a lady*. Here we see Isabel an American lady, believes in her freedom. She comes to London and all are charmed with her. She is a romantic, smart and restless girl. She rejects the love proposal of lord Warburton, kasper only for her sense of freedom. She marries Osmond who seemed to be very smart and highly qualified. But gradually she understands that Osmond is a hindrance to her freedom and decides to leave him though finally she can not do that. The central characters of Hemingway are women who are shown as innocent but emotional. They are not satisfied with their husband only. Rather they quest for other beloveds. Brette Ashley is a British lady in *The sun also Rises*. She believes in the freedom of will. She is beautiful and charming to all. All the male persons regard her as the "Dream girl". She indulges herself with different sexual relationships but she proved to be one of the unhappy frustrated ladies in the world after the Second World War. In *A Farewell to Arms* the central female character is Catherine who is wounded in heart for her dead beloved who died in the world war. He wanted to make physical union with Catherine but failed.

Catherine is taking this futility as a tragedy for her life. She meets again Henry but with less hope of love. She mixes with Henry sexually and becomes pregnant. Yet she thinks that it is one kind of adulteracy in her character.

In the *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the central woman character is Maria. She is wounded physically and heartedly. In her prime age, she was raped by the Fascists. Her beloved Robert took her as a pure and holy girl. Yet she could not condole herself as a chaste girl. In this novel, Heming way expressed Maria as a symbol of freedom, political awareness and eternal love. In Eugene O'Neil's *Strange Interlude* the central character Neenah is a victim of lost love who indulges herself to the freedom of sex later. She loves Gordon in her youth. But her father, a professor, did not support her in her marriage with her beloved. Later her father's conservative and selfish attitudes to her, her sexual relation with the wounded soldiers Marsden's greed for her body, her marriage to Sem, and Mrs. Evans proposal to choose a handsome male person instead of Sem as a baby maker led her life to tragedy. She becomes a mother of Dr. Darel's child with secret illegal love named Gordon. When Gordon became young, Neena wanted to a love-partner with her own son. After the death of Sem, Neena marries Marsden. In this way, Neena enjoys a strange freedom in her womanly life.

Similarly, Nora, the central character in the play *A Dolls House* by Henric Ibsen. is an age concerned girl of the nineteenth century society. She is regarded here as a revolt to her society. She wants to struggle against the adversity of life. She wants to be evaluated same as a man through her fitness. Nora Helmer gets married to Torvald Helmer and has three children. When she heard her husband's recent promotion, she was very excited about Christmas though at that time she was very frustrated. Torvald also regularly refers to her and treats her as a child.

In the play we see that Nora is regarded as a beloved by her husband Torvald Helmer. But Nora does not get any sign of love in that addressing of

Torvald. Rather she accuses about the absence of any love for her in Torvald Helmer towards the end of the play. She talks of a number of related humiliations. In a shocked state, she says:

But you don't talk or think like the man I could bind myself to. When your first tour was over- not about what threatened me, but about what would happen to you- and when there was no more threat, then as far as you were concerned, it was as if nothing had happened at all. I was simply your songbird, your doll, and from now on you would handle it more gently than ever because it was so texture and fragile. At that moment, Torvald, I realized that for eight years I'd been living here with a strange man and that I'd borne him three babies. Oh, I can't bear to think of it- I could tear myself to small pieces. (p. 230)

The audience may think that Nora is an obedient, money-loving, childish wife. In the first act, when Nora asked for money from her husband, Torvald encountered that what she just bought for their kids, she doesn't delay herself in asking for money. It is very majestic how Torvald addresses Nora as a little girl, or even a pet, "my little lark mustn't droop her wings like that. What? Is my squirrel in the sulks?" (Ibsen 842).

It is seemed that he is talking to a small child. He says that as he is giving her money, which builds their interaction seem almost of a grown grandparent giving money to his precious, favorite young granddaughter. This is how Ibsen first introduces Nora to the audience, as a simple minded, obedient trophy-wife.

As the play moves forward, the audience comes to learn that due to a sickness Torvald had in the past, Nora needs money to send her husband for a trip needed to save her husband's life that is why she takes a loan from a rich man known as Mr. Krogstad. There is a little subtlety. Nora had been mad to take loan for her husband that is why she

forged a signature of her father so that she could take loan on time to save her husband's life though it was possible to take loan from her friend, Mrs. Linde who states that "a wife can't borrow [money] without her husband's consent" (Ibsen 848). Nora does not hanker after money and she is very obedient to her husband and she is used to do everything what her husband wants.

The play becomes very interesting when the audience finds that Krogstad is the employee of Torvald's office. Torvald wants to do sack Krogstad but Krogstad knows about the forgery that is why he blackmails Nora and gives a condition to Nora that if she does not convince her husband to stay in his post, he will disclose the forgery. Nora knows about the abhorrence of Torvald towards dishonesty & debt. Nora is in dilemma and she cannot share to her husband and cannot pay the money on time.

Finally, Torvald knows about the debt and forgery and he starts ranging Nora for what she has done. Her all efforts are ended in smoke. She thinks she does everything for whom. Nora states, "When I look back on it now... I lived by performing tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so" (Ibsen 885). Henrik here shows the picture of male dominated society. Torvald cannot realize who contributes in his life and who sacrifices everything for him. When Torvald becomes failure to realize Nora, she finally takes a decision to leave the house and starts searching for the new beginning.

In the "Preface" to *A Doll's House*, John Gassner (1984) writes:

Nora is no mere case history in a suffragette bill o' particulars. Far from being a typical victim of male domination, Nora is lord of the domestic world she calls her doll's house. She has the initiative to nurse her husband through a long illness, the courage to forge his name to a promissory note in command to get the money for his convalescence, and she is even able, in the face of enormous difficulties, to meet the payments on her loan. Only when a disgruntled employee of her husband's bank

tries to blackmail Nora's husband into restoring him to the job from which he has been fired is Nora's deception revealed.

Mitsuya Mori as he also places observations about Ibsen's exposure of female freedom in separate plays. He writes about Nora:

Nora rejects Helmer's authority and he accepts her authority in the end, but this is because Nora has had the actual power in the family from the outset, even if the legitimate power has been with Helmer. This is implied by Nora's casual speech just before Mrs. Linde's entrance in the first act. Nora takes Helmer's arms and says, "Now I want to tell you how I've been thinking we might arrange things, Torvald. As soon as Christmas is over ..."
(1997: 165)

Gail Finney is famous for her essay, "Ibsen and Feminism" wherein Finney celebrates Ibsen as a champion of causes of women's liberation. Further into the essay, Finney brings "double standard" as one of the four sub-topics of her main topic of feminism. Gail writes: Torvald Helmer of *A Doll's House*. Whose most avid concern is for keeping up appearances regardless of the psychological cost, is given to statements about feminine helplessness and childishness versus manly strength and resourcefulness. (1994:92)

It is relevant in this connection to refer to Bertrand Russell who, in his famous *Power*, writes a little about female power and more about powerlessness of women. But, in Chapter 11, titled "Leaders and Followers," of that book, he writes something quite compensating, "A woman who enjoys power in the management of her house is likely to shrink from the sort of political power enjoyed by a Prime Minister; ... Men like power so long as they believe in their own competence to handle the business in question, but when they know themselves incompetent they prefer to follow a leader." As these words remain quite open to intricate and elaborate interpretation, one surely finds Russell

marking that women also have their own areas of power and that a woman also "enjoys power." (1938: 17). Naomi Wolf (1994) writes: 'Towards a New Psychology of Female Power' asserts that our new opportunities will be wasted unless we develop a vision of femininity in which it is appropriate and sexy for women to use power.' (1994: xxviii) Ironically this goes well with our claims about power being there with both the ancient women like Jocasta and the modern ones like Nora. Wolf's (1994) next paragraph in the "Introduction" is a very meaningful deposition: I'll look at how girlhood social organizations lead us into a situation in which, in Gloria Steinem's phrase, "men punish the weak while women punish the strong." Each of us, I believe, has a regal, robust, healthily self-regarding "will to power" that has been submerged (1994: xxviii).

This from Naomi Wolf (1994) appears to be more honest, and is so about women of all times and places. In Shesher Kubita, a famous novel, Rabindranath (2009) has the central male character to say as follows, "The party that has chain in its possession uses it to chain the bird, uses might. Those who don't have chain, chain with opium, with deception. Though the chain-people chain up, they don't deceive; opium-people both chain up and deceive. Women's purses are full of opium, Satanic nature ensures its supply" 2009:1 14 (Islam, Kazi Nazrul, 2009). Kazi Nazrul Islam, in his very relevant poem, "Nari", has written as follows,

Who undermines you, woman, as a hellish broil?

Answer back that the first sin was not the woman. Nil Satan. the man.

Or, what is sin-what is Satan-is neither man, nor woman:

It is asexual; so, it remains equally mixed up with both of them. (2009:114)

CONCLUSION

So from the above discussion it is clear that Nora is a Doll of pioneering feminism not as merely a doll like a puppet in a Doll's House. Through her character Ibsen tries to show the "the responsibility and the guilt of the society," In this context Leo Lowenthal's (1965) speech helps us to comprehend the question of female power:

Although his female protagonists speak of freedom and joy as goals that are incompatible with prevailing conditions, still the manner in which they express their desires is often reminiscent in terms and tones of the austere language of the professed idealism of the male; it remains part and parcel of the value system they themselves protest. (1965: 156).

Here Nora as an Exit taker from her family is symbolic which stands for seeking of pursuit of freedom and power of the female as a whole.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no prospective conflicts of the interest with respect to the research.

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