

**Transformation of the female characters from victim to heroic in Henrik Ibsen’s drama “A Doll’s House”**

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**Abstract:**

Henrik Ibsen was a Norwegian dramatist and novelist who often explored women's experiences in society and the consequences of their choices and acts in light of their moral and ethical convictions. Some writers have centred their stories on female protagonists to highlight the struggles and triumphs of women and their quest for autonomy and acceptance in society. This research is an effort to establish a connection between literature and feminism. Feminism is usually defined as an active desire to change women’s position in society. The selected drama A Doll's House is Ibsen's most well-known play. This is because A Doll's House has become the most widely read play utilised as a required text in educational institutions around the globe. The play is a harsh critique of the gender norms in marriage in Ibsen's culture. It was the first of Ibsen's plays to put women's issues in the front and centre, paving the way for subsequent works like Ghosts and Hedda Gabler. Many people see Ibsen as a feminist author based on the content of these three plays (Suleiman, 2010). Selected drama plays a vital role in the study of momentum gaining Feminist Movement or Women's Right Movement in the contemporary era which can also be considered as one of the inspirations behind writing this drama. Apart from this, it is also considered that Ibsen was inspired by Laura Kieler’s story which is similar to the protagonist Nora’s. In this drama, we come to observe the close relationship between the female and patriarchal society. The expectations and the reality, the camouflage of traits of one's real personality and many more things. The present research paper tries to portray the female characters especially the protagonist in the victim phase, transition phase and heroic phase. The close reading of the present drama makes one aware of the women from the male perspective. The selected drama can be considered as one of the best dramas in studying the female characters in all three phases - victim, transition and heroic. In the present paper, various dimensions are considered for a better understanding of the theme like social, personal, relationships, etc.

**Introduction:**

Feminism is a spectrum of resistance, a tapestry fashioned from the threads of collective struggle and individual rebellion. It's the whispered secrets of sisters, the unapologetic roar of rebels, and the steady heartbeat of determination. Feminism is a refusal to be silenced, a rejection of patriarchy's limitations, and a recovery of spaces where women's voices have been suppressed. It celebrates the messy, glorious complexity of women, in all of their intersectional, flawed, and awe-inspiring glory. Feminism is a verb, a noun, a battle cry, and a love letter to all women, throughout history, today, and tomorrow. Semon de Beauvoir in her well-known work ‘The Second Sex’ says “One is not born but becomes a woman”. This statement makes us realise the bitter truth behind the condition of women. This mere statement is enough to understand that women are the byproduct of subjugation. Gilbert and Guba in one of their works described how the people or other writers described female authors. Mary Wollstonecraft was criticised as the ‘Hyena in petticoats’ by Horace Walpole. (Walpole, H. 1798. Letters of Horace Walpole to Sir Horace Mann. Edited by J. Doran. R. Bentley.) History has been the witness to all these atrocities that men have committed.

The rebellious women raised from this subjugation have reached the heights that men of patriarchal mindset have never thought of. The female mindset was created in a strange way that she did not realise that she was being subjugated. She was trapped in a male-dominated society with patriarchal bounds. But later the realisation made the change in attitude of women which led to the rise of their self-esteem and so they dared to jump off the fencing men and ultimately the society had created. It cannot be counted as an absolute achievement since we are still learning to crawl. The present situation of society with the drastic rise in social media is playing the role of a mirror for society. The portrayal of women in the media is questionable. Though women are developing and prospering in careers and achieving everything they desire, we cannot claim that they have reached the equilibrium state of society with men.

Development of Feminist Values in the Women Character of the drama ‘Doll’s House’ by Henrik Ibsen: In the selected drama A Doll’s House Ibsen has shown the female characters caught in miserable situations. The protagonist in the play “Nora” is shown as a fragile and tiny thing from the perspective of her husband. He calls her a skylark, squirrel, extravagant little person, etc. These words reflect that though he loves her he considers her fragile and tiny.

“When did my squirrel come home?” (3, Ibsen, Henrik. A Doll’s House. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)

“Very well. But now tell me, you extravagant little person, what would you like for yourself?” (6, Ibsen, Henrik. A Doll’s House. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)

Nora and her husband Helmer are married with three children but still, he considers her not capable of handling intellectual things.

Helmer: “You can’t deny it, my dear little Nora. [Puts his arm round her waist.] It’s a sweet little spendthrift, but she uses up a deal of money. One would hardly believe how expensive such little persons are!” (7, Ibsen, Henrik. A Doll’s House. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)

He believes her only with the household work and looking after the children. He thinks that she needs his assistance in every intellectual thing. He does not believe that she can be independent so he only fancies her beauty and is indeed in love with her looks and childish behaviour. Nora too takes pleasure in playing with it as she gets loved. She is not aware of her subjugation. Like many other women out in the world, she is also living in her fantasy of so-called womanhood or trying to be the perfect woman that society claims to be. The patriarchal obligations do not seem to bother the women who live in fantasy. They feel secure and content in their subordinate lives. It is engraved in their brains that they are more cultured and courteous if they remain under the rules and regulations of men. Without a male person in any woman’s life or without kids, they were considered worthless.

NORA: [going to the table on the right]. “I should not think of going against your wishes.” (9, Ibsen, Henrik. A Doll’s House. The Project Gutenberg, 2001. )

NORA: “So you are quite alone. How dreadfully sad that must be. I have three lovely children. You can’t see them just now, for they are out with their nurse. But now you must tell me all about it.” (13, Ibsen, Henrik. A Doll’s House. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)

MRS LINDE: “No, a wife cannot borrow without her husband’s consent.” (21, Ibsen, Henrik. A Doll’s House. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)

Women took the privilege of being subordinate to men. They considered looking after her family as the only duty of hers. In the selected drama Ibsen has depicted various spectrums of the life of

women. Nora's friend Mrs. Linde is one of the female characters in the selected drama and with her character, Ibsen has depicted a lonely and helpless woman.

MRS LINDE: "My mother was alive then, and was bedridden and helpless, and I had to provide for my two younger brothers; so I did not think I was justified in refusing his offer." (16, Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)

Helmer treats Nora like a child and talks with her like she is an innocent child whom he adores; this may seem to be his extreme love towards her.

NORA: "Your squirrel would run about and do all her tricks if you would be nice, and do what she wants." (63, Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)

But this sense changes when Helmer finds out the truth Nora was hiding all these years and he loses his control and abuses her mercilessly. He calls her a hypocrite, liar, worse, criminal, woman with no religion, morality, etc. He also says that he won't let her be with his children anymore and then Nora realises what she means to Helmer. But when Helmer reads another letter from Krogstad of forgiveness he is relieved and his temper changes suddenly. He seems to be free and so his words change. He claims that he is saved and says nothing about Nora. There is extreme realisation and it leads to the change of Nora's attitude. Then and there she starts to think about her self-esteem and she finds herself to be a mere doll playing in the hands of her husband. She realises that her husband loved her but did not respect her as an intellectual person. He did admire her beauty and playfulness only.

HELMER: "Now you have destroyed all my happiness. You have ruined all my future. It is horrible to think of! I am in the power of an unscrupulous man; he can do what he likes with me, ask anything he likes of me, give me any orders he pleases—I dare not refuse. And I must sink to such miserable depths because of a thoughtless woman!" (119, Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)

Nora is broken by the words of Helmer. She is unable to withstand what she is accused of being. She spits out all the agony with her words. She reflects on what she felt about her entire life.

NORA: "It is perfectly true, Torvald. When I was at home with papa, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed from him I concealed the fact, because he would not have liked it. He called me his doll-child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls. And when I came to live with you" (125, Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)

NORA: "No, only merry. And you have always been so kind to me. But our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa's doll-child; and here the children have been my dolls. I thought it great fun when you played with me, just as they thought it great fun when I played with them. That is what our marriage has been, Torvald." (125, Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)

Though Nora had lied it was for Helmer's life. She had borrowed money from Krogstad with a fake signature of her father. When Krogstad was aware of this fact he tried to blackmail her to save his job which was in the hands of Helmer who was not aware of anything about this. Nora was suffering all these threats alone. She used to pay Krogstad regularly by saving each penny and working very hard. She was a sensible lady her entire life but was neglected by each man in her life.

NORA: “[undisturbed]. I mean that I was simply transferred from papa’s hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste, and so I got the same tastes as you—or else I pretended to, I am really not quite sure which—I think sometimes the one and sometimes the other. When I look back on it, it seems to me as if I had been living here like a poor woman—just from hand to mouth. I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so. You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life.” (125, Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)

Nora had worked very hard to repay the money she had borrowed for the treatment of Helmer. She felt pleasure in earning money for her family though she felt tired. By following quotations Ibsen has portrayed that women are no less than any men. Women also want to work for their family and be a responsible and dignified person. They are capable of doing anything like men.

NORA: “Well, then I have found other ways of earning money. Last winter I was lucky enough to get a lot of copying to do; so I locked myself up and sat writing every evening until quite late at night. Many a time I was desperately tired; but all the same it was a tremendous pleasure to sit there working and earning money. It was like being a man.” (24, Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)

When Nora is blamed for not being a sensible woman by her husband she is apart. All the efforts she had taken to be useful to her husband to save his life are of no value. She feels miserable for not being understood by anyone. Nora is filled with the agony of not being an independent woman too. She feels pity for her own to be a doll in the hands of her father and then in her husband. She is not convinced by Helmer's words after hearing all the dark words earlier. He claimed it was out of anger and to leave all the past things behind and calm herself down. But Nora couldn't stay with him after all this happened.

HELMER: “You have loved me as a wife ought to love her husband. Only you had not sufficient knowledge to judge of the means you used. But do you suppose you are any the less dear to me, because you don’t understand how to act on your own responsibility? No, no; only lean on me; I will advise you and direct you. I should not be a man if this womanly helplessness did not just give you a double attractiveness in my eyes. You must not think anymore about the hard things I said in my first moment of consternation, when I thought everything was going to overwhelm me. I have forgiven you, Nora; I swear to you I have forgiven you.” (121, Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)

Nora is filled with self-respect and regret for not being an independent woman so, she decides to educate herself and lead a content and independent life. She is ready to leave the life she felt pleased to live in, her children, husband and home. She felt it was an utterly necessary thing to get out of the trap she was trapped in for her entire life and lead her own life without any man to guide her. Before leaving her home she sits to talk with Helmer. In all the eight years or longer than that from the very beginning of their acquaintance, they have never exchanged a word on any serious subject. It was their first serious discussion and she talked with him about what she had decided. She talks about her past and present, her expectations and reality. She tells him that she is going to leave their home and he tries to persuade her to stay. She refuses everything he says. He asks Nora to live like brother and sister at least but she refuses it. She declares Helmer free from her bond, returns the wedding ring and asks him to return his. Helmer requests her to stay till morning but Nora claims that she will not live in a strange man's room. Helmer sinks in the chair he sat in grief.

With dignity, Nora leaves the house. This bold step of Nora makes her a hero in all sorts of situations. She becomes free from all the obligations of her husband, kids and marriage. Nora has set on a new journey in her life to be an independent woman. She is eager to educate herself and work for a living. She wants to learn about religion and everything that she wants. Nora depicted in the beginning of the play and Nora at the end are drastically opposite characters. She is no more fragile, she has transformed into a new lady with strength and bold enough to stand for herself, to tear the strings making her puppet. She is no more a victim but a hero for herself.

**Conclusion:**

Women being a part of society are equal in dignity and mental strength. They are humans so need to be treated like a normal person. Treating women as delicate and fragile entities every minute is mere disrespect. Apart from adoration, they need to be included in all the intellectual means in the family first. Women's opinions should be taken into consideration and they must be respected. It is said that charity begins at home, so it's important to stay more respectful and attentive towards females in our family first of all. They need to be educated on the practical things to be independent and so must learn to be independent willingly and not be dependent on anyone. In the selected drama, the protagonist proved that she can be as equal to other people, especially men. She can have a good education and also can manage her life independently. She felt the subjugation and so rebelled against the odds of society and set on her new journey of life she desired to lead. This makes her the hero for her boldness and rebellious attitude against societal norms. Her willingness to be an independent and dignified person makes her move with great strength that no one dares easily. The drastic change in the characterization of the protagonist makes the ending of the play more appealing. The victim transformed into a hero makes it a fabulous play.

**References:**

1. A Doll's House (Ibsen, Henrik. A Doll's House. The Project Gutenberg, 2001.)
2. The Second Sex (Beauvoir, Simone De. The Second Sex. Vintage Books, 2011.)