



DIFFERENT TRACES OF FEMINISM AS ARTICULATED THROUGH THE PLAY OF IBSEN: A DOLL'S HOUSE

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Abstract:

This academic exercise delves deep in to the manifold aspects of feminism and the various opinions arising out of such a view of it. There is an attempt to look in to the concept of feminism in the light of its western experimentation and the variegated flaws inherent in such interpretation through this work. The literary paper also pinpoints the character of Nora and her life from a meek state of being under the stewardship of her husband to a state of reasserting her identities apart from her husband's fold. This emotional turmoil taking place within Nora is adequately articulated through this work. In fact this exercise is an apt study of the character of Nora and the Concept of feminism born out of her characterization in the play.

Keywords: Feminism, Western Experimentation, Identities & Hysterization

Different Traces of Feminism as Articulated through the Play of Ibsen: A Doll's House:

Ibsen's A Doll's house articulates different version or phases of feminism in its framework. It is a radical play with a very touching sort of self-discovery being experienced by the protagonist of the play, Nora, Who had to live under the thumb of her husband Torvald Helmer for a long time because of her inability to understand her husband's real character. At the initial stage of the play Nora is projected as a weak wife who would carry out the dictates of her husband Torvald regardless of his treatment of her. There is a calm atmosphere prevailing at the beginning of the play. But the play becomes very revealing at the middle and concluding stages in which the true colors and attitudes of different characters come out in the open for everyone to see and evaluate.

There is kind of belief in the mind of Torvalds, Nora's husband that She can be taken for granted. Only a mere traditional role of wife is bestowed on Nora. She is considered as a good mother and manager of the household, although the financial affairs of the household are controlled by her husband. She doesn't face any big problem in her married life at initial stage of the play. She is apparently contented by what she has as the wife of Torvald. At the beginning stage itself she comes across her old time friend and former schoolmate Mrs.Linde whose personal life is in a state of disarray. She of course comes to Nora to seek her help and assistance to get her out of the problems she is in. but the meeting between the two only would break the ground for a new friend in her life to go ahead with her intention of leading an independent life when she realizes the true attitude of her husband towards her.

The devotion of Nora towards her children cannot be questioned. She does whatever under her capacity to bring up her children in the best possible manner she can. Her husband Torvald also considers her in that way. As the play progresses there is a trace of feminism subtly visible, when Nora has a sort of intimate relationship or friendship with an old man named Doctor Rank. From the conversation between Nora and Doctor Rank, it is amply made it clear that she is a woman of independent spirit which is hidden in herself undetected by anyone including her own husband. This spirit

is the hallmark of the feminist movements of different modes all throughout the world. This is not a spirit of rebellious nature.

At the concluding stage of the play Nora abandoned her children in the play Nora abandons her children in the hands of her husband it has happened as a result of the sense of injustice she has experienced in the fold of her husband. This unmotherly conduct might have come from a sense of Victimization, she might have experienced in the hands of her husband Torvald. This is what Betty Friedan says about the victimization of a mother named Nora in her book *Feminine Mystique*

The victimization these unmotherly mothers inflict results from their own victimization by a powerful social norm equating anatomy with destiny; in Ibsen's notes to *A Doll's House* he conjectures that a mother in modern society is like 'Certain insects that go away and die when she has done her duty in the propagation of the race. Hence Ibsen bears witness to a larger nineteenth-century historical strategy which Michel Foucault has termed 'hysterization', or the process of defining women in terms of female sexuality, the results of which was to bind them to their reproductive function. (p.95)

Nora definitely commits a mistake of a sort, when she indulges in forgery in order to save her husband who was seriously ill for a long time in the past. But there is a social set-up which should be given priority before taking up the issue of Nora's financial discrepancy. Women as emotional beings don't think about the consequences of their action if their action ultimately leads to the short-term resolution of a particular problem. In Nora's life also the same thing happens. She simply bypasses certain legal issues involved because of her inexperience with legal matters. As a result of her rudimentary knowledge of legal matters, the person from whom she borrows the money one cunning lawyer named Nils Krogstad put her in deep trouble, not only her but her peaceful family life .which is in complete turmoil.

Nora is not in fact responsible for what she has done. She in fact has committed no fraud. The social and legal systems in society she lives in are framed in such a fashion that she has no option but to resort to the tactic of committing forgery to collect money for her husband's rehabilitation to a comfortable land where his illness can be put to rest in a permanent manner. She set aside financial propriety only to save her husband's life. For that she should not have been treated in the manner she is treated in the play and the person who is responsible for putting her into deep trouble is a male who would like to have his pound of the flesh by using her as pawn in this battle against her husband.

At the concluding stage of the play, Nora clearly realizes the fact that she is suppressed, oppressed and compressed by her husband in his seemingly peaceful household. This is what Montefiore explicates in her book *Feminism and poetry* about the plight and predilection, the women have to encounter in the literary as well as social fields of life.

It is that women share with men the brute fact of being human. That in turn means that women experience along with men, either from within or without, all kinds of oppression not just that involved in being female. So that if we were to make a female / feminist poetic dependent on giving priority to the particular oppression which comes with being female, we would be ruling out of women's poetry an enormous area of interest, experience and concern. (p 200)

Ibsen's Play *A Doll's House* there is a kind of variation in the explication of feminism. At the initial stage of the play feminism is shown in a subdued manner. But as

the play comes to its concluding stage, there is a kind of radical feminism portrayed within the frame work of the play.

There is a moral question in the play *A Doll's House* whether there is any impropriety committed by Nora while trying to save her husband through forgery or not. The fact of the matter is that it is not a moral question of huge magnitude offence here. But the attempt of some male critics to show Nora's forgery case in the category of sexual offence is absolutely unjustified at any stretch of the imagination. At the concluding part of the play the letter Nils Krogstad has written in order to show Nora in a poor light before her husband is reviewed by Torvald; Nora's husband; There is a totally uncharacteristic emotional outburst from his part. These angry words of Torvald would clearly indicate that his love for Nora is based on certain flimsy ground other than on a strong ground.

Helmer (walking about the room). What a horrible awakening! All these eight years- She who was my pride and joy –a hypocrite, liar- worse- a criminal! The unutterable ugliness of it all!- What disgraceful BEHAVIOUR! (Act III scene II)

In fact Torvald is a hypocrite for judging his wife on the basis of his own strict rigid moral and legal principles. It should be noted here that a male is responsible for the downfall of Nora, although, She takes an independent decision at last, Nora is outrightedly intimidated by Nils Krogstad is a part of the wider discrimination, women have to face in a male-dominated society.

But, there is a counter argument in favour of Torvald, Nora's husband that the judgment of Torvald is done by Nora on the basis of a single incident in which he calls her a criminal for committing financial impropriety. These angry words are uttered by Torvald in the heat of the moment for which he should not have been treated in the way he is handled by Nora. But before the aggressive argument of the feminists in favour of Nora's case because the humiliation heaped on her, the other discourses surrounding this play pale into insignificance

The fact of the matter is that Helmer loves Nora as long as she is an obedient kind of wife to him. This is a kind of superior male attitude. He doesn't forgive her for the mistake she has committed .Because he puts his social reputation above the reputation and good name of his wife Nora. His words clearly denote this fact.

Helmer. Now you have destroyed all my happiness. You have ruined 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 any thing he likes of me, give me any orders he pleases- I dare not refuse. And I must to such miserable depths because of a thoughtless woman!. (Act III Scene -II)

It should be remembered that this sudden change has come from a man who has in the past praised her house keeping skills and abilities. Here, it is apt to mention the difference between Western feminism and Eastern feminism. There is a subtle distinction between both forms of feminism. How Nora would have acted if she is placed in an eastern society with its own characteristics. In an eastern context Nora doesn't act in the radical manner in which she acts in the western context because of her social and family- based priorities. If Nora is in eastern society, she has certain moral and social obligations as a mother and wife and she has to act in accordance with those responsibilities placed on her.

R.K. Narayan's novel *The Dark Room* is written in the eastern context only. In this novel, the protagonist Savthri faces abject injustice from her husband. Her husband even maintains a concubine to humiliate her. But she is helpless to do anything to bring

him to own back the favors of her husband that is only in the eastern context. But in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* Nora doesn't make any move to bring about a compromise in their married or family life after her husband accuses her of criminal behavior. Nora leaves her husband and has no intention whatsoever of coming back to his home. This kind of attitude from the western context only because in the eastern context although Savthri leaves her home and husband, she is forced to come back, swallowing her pride because of her social obligations as a mother and the head of the family. So in the eastern context the services of women should not be seen in isolation. In fact they are the sum total of the social fabric of Indian society. They are the salt of soil of India.

A famous feminist Gwendolyn Brooks has this to say about the Indian feminist and their attitude towards different issues concerning eastern context.

Given the hostile climate on reservations for discussion of feminist theory of any stripe would be well received. For Indian feminists, every woman's issue is framed in the larger context of Indian society and the characteristics of eastern civilization and Indian women want to assert their power by insisting on their Traditional roles within Indian society which involve men and women in complementary roles. (p 220)

There is a conflict between the two types of feminism represented by two female characters in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*. Nora is a feminist of extreme level to a certain extent when she abandons her husband's home. But Nora's friend Mrs.Linde is ready to make compromises with her former boyfriend Nils Krogstad for getting certain favours from him including the favour of leading a stable family life. So there is a complete break-up of the family life of Nora and Torvald in the play on the one hand, and on the other hand there is the formation of a family life between Mrs.Linde and Nils Krogstad. It should be noted that Nils Krogstad at one stage of their friendship in the past did illtreat Mrs.Linde. So, the play tries to portray compromising as well as uncompromising feminism in its framework.

In the same way there are clashes among feminist belonging to different races, communities, castes, ideologies, religions and ethnicities. So, there is no uniform sort of feminism existing in the world. In fact the concept of feminism is played out in the practical level through different factors related to the background and specific social, political, economic, and moral context of various cultures and civilizations of feminist. So, in fact feminism in its very conception or composition is heterogeneous, plural and diverse.

There is a moral question in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*. This dilemma is born out of the fact that how much importance the play has to give the question of following truth in its letter and spirit. In the strict sense Nora doesn't follow truth; When She hides from her husband the real details about the source from which she receives money to save her husband's life. In that sense she can be blamed for what has happened to her and her family life. But then she is an inexperienced woman bent on saving the life of her husband. It should be remembered that the concept of feminism cannot simply brush aside the concept of truth prevalent in the society in order to show Nora in a good light certain acts are unacceptable in a morally high powered society whether those acts are committed by feminists or people strongly believe in the patriarchal mode of society.

At least Nora realizes the fact that she is indirectly exploited by not only her husband but also her own father. It is a continuous process of exploitation only she has experienced. The following dialogue between Nora and Helmer would make this fact precisely clear. In this conversation she accuses Helmer out of an acute self realization

of the ways in which she is treated by her husband. Here in this argument between husband and wife one more thing also comes to the forefront that might have enabled Torvald to rule over her. She also makes it quite clear why she has compelled to break the law in an eloquent style in the play. This conversation also gives us a hint of the domineering altitude of Nora's husband.

Nora, It is perfectly true, Torvald. When I was at home with father, he told me his opinion about everything , and so I had the 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-

Helmer-What sort of an expression it is Nora. (undisturbed). I mean that was simply transferred from father 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 wanted it like that. You and father have committed a great sin against me. It is yours fault that I have made nothing of my life.

Helmer - How unreasonable and how ungrateful you are Nora! Haven't you been happy here?

Nora - No, I have never been happy. I thought I was, but it has never really been so.

Helmer - Not. Not happy!

Nora - Not 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 father'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. This is what our marriage has been, Torvald.

Nora - Actually, you were perfectly right. I am not fit for the task .These is another task I must undertake first. I must try and educate myself- you are doing that I must do that for myself. And that is why I am going to leave you now. And again.

Nora - I assure you .Torvald , that is not an easy question to answer. I really don't know. The thing perplexes me altogether. I only know that you and I look at it in quite a different light. I am learning, too, that the law is quite another thing from what I supposed; but I find it impossible to convince myself that the law is right to spare her old dying father, or to save her husband's life I can't believe that. (Act-III Scenes I and II)

But, it should be understood by Nora that law will take its own course whether it is in the compassionate ground or not in a democratic framework. In a constitutional system rule of law is the predominant entity. The fact of the matter is that in name of feminism, feminists cannot twist the laws in the air to suite their personal interests and agendas.

Nora, at last realizes the fact that her husband Torvald treats her like a doll completely disregarding her feelings and sentiments. The feminist in Nora asserts herself before the male disgraceful attitude of Torvald. From the following words of Nora it is adequately clear that she has not lived a contented life with her husband. Under his roof she is always unhappy. This unhappiness of Nora can be traced up to the present period in which women living in different families experiences this feeling of

isolation and alienation, the same feeling Nora experiences after living with her husband around eight years.

Nora, May be, But you neither think nor talk like the man I could find myself to. As soon as your fear was over and it was not fear for what threatened me , but for what might happen to you-When the whole thing was past, as far as you were concerned it was exactly as if nothing at all had happened. Exactly as before, I was your little skylark, your doll, which would in future treat with doubly gentle care, because it was so brittle and frazil.(Getting up) Trovald-it was then it dawned upon me that for eight years I had been living here with a strange man, and had borne him three children-Oh can't bear to think of it! I could tear myself into little bits!. (Act.III scene-III)

Conclusion:

So, Ibsen's A Doll's House is a play which gives out so many aspects of feminism and the problems in the various interpretations of feminism. This play can be analyzed of its feminist traces through male as well as female perspectives. But what is crucial in its systematic study is the extent Nora can go within the framework of conventional as well as liberal means to liberate herself from the clutches or shackles of her husband by using the concept of feminism.

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