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### Research Paper

“I must make up my mind which is right – society or I” (Ibsen 84), proclaimed Henry Ibsen in the famous play of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “*A Doll's House*” in which he openly voices his opinions regarding the Victorian Norwegian women of his time. The traditional portrayal of the patriarchy along with the traditional and rebellious attitude of women has made this play a success which does not only leave the contemporary audience astonished but also raises many concerns regarding the prescribed social role of women and their importance in society. Henrik Ibsen has written a thought-provoking play, “*A Doll's House*” which was first performed on the stage of Denmark in 1879 and it tackled the theme of women's role and place in society along with presenting a critique on the traditional marriage model. This play revolves around the life of the female character Nora who has prescribed to the assumed social gender role throughout the play but towards the end, she has come to a realization and chooses her freedom and place instead of the distrustful life with her husband and children which disrupts the social narrative of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The liberals and feminists view the end of the novel as a self-realization phase in a woman's life while the traditional audience and critics have taken Nora's step as a disgrace to the image of woman and motherhood. The theme of the womanhood and character of Nora can be seen as distorted between the two poles of “society and I” and that's why it deeply displays the social ideals of the society and culture in which it existed. Ibsen's *Doll House* centers around Victorian gender roles and patriarchal hold over women's lives that provides a clear insight to the ideals of the Victorian society which not only limit women to

the domestic spheres but also assumes them as emotional and irrational creatures. Ibsen's work not only provide a realistic critique to the social norms and perceptions but the 'self-realization' of its central character followed by the assertive attitude of the female protagonist inspired the feminist movement of the twentieth century where women started protesting against the assigned gender roles and demanding for equal rights and recognition in marriages.

The character of Nora presents the image of a traditional woman who usually gets instructed to confine to the strict gender role from an early age which places women at a periphery and limits them to the domestic sphere. Nora belongs to an upper middle class where the women are forced to adhere to the prescribed social norms that are made by society. Her role as Helmer's wife does not give her freedom of choice and living in the household but she has also experienced the "othering". Unlike other characters, she is the protagonist of the play but she is also deemed to face the same marginalization and submissiveness as a doll as in Helmer's house, she is treated like a doll that does not have her own saying but follows the instructions of her husband. Her only purpose in the house is to complete the picaresque image of the family in front of the outside world. Her portrayal in the first two acts depicts that she is a domesticated and subservient creature who is unable to understand the subtle operation of the patriarchy in society. Nora is the product of the society in which she is brought up and it teaches her to "only display softness of temper, outward obedience, scrupulous attention that her "Most sacred duties were to her husband and her children" (Ibsen 68). Nora does not only adhere to the likes and dislikes of her husband but she also sacrifices her freedom of choice and wishes to bring prosperity in her household and married life. This confinement in the gender role of Nora also provides a clear image of the patriarchy that is operating in the society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as Nora's decisions and choices are structured by the male figure of her family which are her husband Torvald and her father.

Through the lens of feminism in Henry Ibsen's play "A Dolls' House", the readers can clearly view the flaws that exist in the patriarchal society of the Victorian era as this play does not only exposes the gender inequality and disparity that exist in the marriage relationships. In the interaction of Nora and Helmer and Krogstad and Nora, the inferiority of Nora's female character is evident. Nora's marriage is very traditional which is based on the inferior-superior relationship between husband and wife which is somehow opposing to modern marriages. Templeton asserts marriage as "a pan-cultural ideal...a relation of superior and inferior in which the wife is a creature of little intellectual and moral capacity, who's right and the proper station is subordination to her husband" (Templeton 138). From the start of the play, readers can observe that Nora is marginalized while Torvald is the head of the family and her life as Nora is presented in degraded imagery who is not only carefree but also frivolous. She is treated like a child by her husband who does not give credit to her opinion in any matter and Nora has internalized this attitude of her husband which is clear when she responds naively to her husband's petty simpleton names such as "Featherbrain" and "skylark" as he says, "Is this my little squirrel bustling about?" and "Come, come my little skylark must not drop her wings" (Ibsen 4-5). He also puts a ban on her for eating sweets just like parents who forbid their children from taking any action without their permission. This act of Torvald is not only absurd but it also imposes the theory of superiority that husbands are superior while women are the object of their desires. Through the presentation of this communication in the play, readers can detect that the idea of patriarchy is embedded in the mind of the people of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even women have internalized these ideas of women's submissive and male superiority. Helmer's dominance and the natural obedience of Nora and the whole play's scenario help the readers to understand the intensity of the situation that was prevailing in Victorian society. According to the "second sex theory" of De Beauvoir, readers are introduced to the concept of alterity faced by Nora and they also realize that "othering" is a concept that is present in the

lives of women that exist in the society because they are viewed as inferior and naïve and they are unable to take a decision for the lives (Marso 42). The hierarchal perspective outlined by Henry Ibsen points towards the idea of women presented by Aristotle as he said “the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities. We should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness” (Akter 81). Helmer's character clearly confines to the ideas that are presented by Aristotle and he also treats Nora as an emotional and sentimental being like a child which presents the overall mentality of the patriarchal society.

The theme of patriarchy and womanhood represents the society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the backdrop of the play is the Victorian society in which the women were assumed to have the role constructed by the society while the male holds the dominant position. Women were not allowed to take any decision on their own and in 1879, “they were not legally permitted to borrow money without her husband’s consent, so Nora must resort to deception to borrow the money she so desperately needs for her husband” (Pebruantari 4). Feminism and the issues of women were always evident in this era which left many women submissive and marginalized as they were controlled by the male head of the family. Through the depiction of Nora, Ibsen has communicated the mentality of the 19<sup>th</sup> society in which the culture and traditions also behold the power of the patriarchal society and the women had internalized this system by adapting to the inactive and submissive role. However, the end of the play is considered revolutionary for feminism when Nora has abandoned her husband and children and decided to live a life of her own which left many 19<sup>th</sup> century readers shocked and in dismay. As Nora said in the play, “I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are--- or, at all events, I must try and become one” (Ibsen 83). Here, due to the decision of Nora, the alienation of her from the society in which she exists gets greater and denser. Many critics from the Victorian time period object to the decision that Ibsen has made for his character because it does not only shatter the existing cultural ideals of the Victorian society but also

forces women to think about their rights first which endangers the existing patriarchal notion (Rosefeldt 85). So, through this play, Ibsen has highlighted the social system and culture of 19<sup>th</sup>-century society and elevated the status of theatre from mere entertainment sources to the forum of revealing social delinquency.

To communicate the central theme of social problems and concern of the play, Ibsen has used social status as an important characterization tool. Nearly all the characters are placed in their assumed gender role which is constructed by the patriarchal culture and they represent a certain segment of the society (Plung 125). Torvald and Nora belong to the upper-middle-class as Torvald is a lawyer who is later promoted to the high position of a bank manager. His marriage with Nora is the image of pure traditional Victorian marriage in which the relationship works based on the relationship dynamics of superiority and inferiority, as Torvald is the head of the family. He fulfills the traditional norms of the society by becoming the sole bread earner of the household and his love for Nora is also pure and effective unless Nora makes a mistake and Torvald's traditional role of husband overshadows his love for his wife as he says "What a horrible awakening! All these eight years - she who was my joy and pride - a hypocrite, a liar- worse a criminal" (Ibsen 77). Torvald's obsession to be treated as superiors provides a strong standing for the depiction of the theme of patriarchy. While Nora's character has undergone transformation throughout the play as in the start she is presented as a naïve, submissive and traditional woman who enjoys the duties of mother and wife as she says "Just fancy, my husband has been made manager of the bank!..... Yes tremendous! A barrister 's profession is such an uncertain thing" (Ibsen 11). Nora seems happy but towards the end of the play, she seems to come on a self-realization stage and take decisions for her own liberty and freedom. However, self-sacrifice is the major part of the both female characters Nora and Mrs. Linday as Nora sacrifices her honesty, trust, her freedom, and desire for many years for her family and remains loyal to her husband. While Mrs. Linday sacrifices her love for the sake

of her family as she leaves Krogstad and marries a rich person so that her family can live a resourceful and happy life. Moreover, Nils Krogstad is a traditionally male character who uses his power and authority to blackmail Nora as he considers her helpless, poor creature "But I tell you this if I get thrown into the gutter for the second time. I shall take you with me" (Ibsen 54). All these characters are contributing to the theme of patriarchy and women roles as they are all confined to their gender roles which makes the text's message more effective for communication.

Ibsen was almost instantly associated with the Norwegian feminist movement with the publication of *A Doll's House*. He made it quite obvious that he was a supporter of the battle for women's equality. His 1878 notes for *A Doll's House* detail Ibsen's vision of contemporary society's patricentric values, where "a woman cannot be herself in present society; it is a completely masculine society, with laws devised by males and counsels and judges who scrutinise feminine behaviour from a male perspective" (Alexander 75). Ibsen also backed a petition in 1884 in favour of married women's distinct property rights. Ibsen explained why women, not men, should be consulted on the married women's property law, stating that "consulting males on such a matter is like to asking wolves whether they wanted more protection for sheep" (Hossain 7). The publication of *A Doll's House* caused a frenzy of interest among feminist thinkers in Norway and across Europe, since Nora's character laid the groundwork for the women's suffrage movement in the nineteenth century by locking the door on her husband and children in the middle of the night. Gina Krog, a famous Norwegian feminist in the 1880s and founder of the feminist magazine *Nylaende*, was one of many who referred to the play as a "miracle" due to its reformatory and transformative potential, among several other instances of the play's influence (Hassan Balaky And Mosawir Sulaiman 41). Amalie Skram, the famed Norwegian naturalist writer who was also the country's first author to explore the issue of women's sexuality, lauded it for its dramatic and psychological effect.

She saw it as a warning of what might happen if women started to recognise and speak up against injustices committed against them on a broader scale. She observes that, just as Nora appears in the final scene, free and unencumbered by any divine or human bond, without commitment or obligation to the man to whom she has made her promise or to the children she has brought into this world—in the same way, we will find the wife in the modern marriage, from beginning to end, free and unencumbered by any divine or human bond, without commitment or obligation to the man to whom she has made her promise or to the children she has brought into this world— (Bondevik 191). According to Anna Agerholt's *History of the Norwegian Women's Movement*, *A Doll's House* had a considerable influence on the development of women's situations in nineteenth-century Scandinavia (Blom 591). Ibsen defined freedom in his writings as the emancipation from all kinds of oppression, regardless of their source. According to Ibsen, women's inferior situation inside the four walls of the home was equivalent to working men's precarious situation, since both were equally disadvantaged in their respective domains. In Ibsen's viewpoint, women's rights and human rights were identical, which is why he intended to provide Nora all of the social rights that society was not prepared to provide a woman at the time of the play's creation. He saw women as individuals, not as "man's dependant, if not his slave," as others have. Ibsen's work sought to depict the world through the perspective of a woman in order to develop a distinct female identity. They had never been encouraged to take a tour across the globe before today. Men acquire the ability to see the world via their eyes, as if they were devoid of crucial biological organs that allow them to see and feel what is going on around them. Women's limited and constrained perspectives restrict them from realising that "[woman] is first and foremost a human being," as the expression goes. They must take a step back to observe the true nature of the cosmos, which is not predetermined by mankind, and they must learn how to build their own conceptions from the bottom up.

In contrast to conventional conceptions of autonomous women, Ibsen thought that women can only find the fortitude to fight for their rights in a male-dominated society by self-realization; among other things, she should be conscious of her own identity and role within the family and society. "What you refer to as freedom, I refer to as liberties; and what I refer to as freedom is nothing more than a persistent, active attainment of the sensation of freedom," Ibsen properly observed of the idea of freedom. The concept of female independence continues to be debated in the twenty-first century. Women in the western world have come a long way in achieving their independence and the right to live their lives as they like. On the other hand, women in third-world nations continue to battle for the realisation of their human rights (Davies and Chisholm 285). Ibsen envisioned a new society in which women were treated equally to men and their relationships were based on ideals like as equality, honesty, and love. His female characters' circumstances, struggles, and conflicts are indicative of each woman who want to "gradually awaken from a dream a wonderful, grotesque, impossible dream" in order to live a free life.

In conclusion, Henry Ibsen in the play "*A Doll's House*" has presented a social critique on the issues of women that they were facing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The feministic and patriarchal critique in the play has provided an opportunity for readers and the audience to understand the brevity of the situation and analyze the play from multiple social perspectives. Due to the clear representation of the theme, this play is considered as the illustration of 19<sup>th</sup>-century society which was patriarchal and oppressive but due to the self-realization of the woman, the feministic movement was slowly emerging. Nora has received a certain realization about her rights towards the end which does not only shattered the existing social ideas for women but also raised many questions in the mind of the audience. Nora's transformation and her journey towards self-actualization make this text a pure feminist text which displays the struggles of the woman in the male-dominated Victorian society. Nora's self-realization stands reflective



of the realization of the twentieth century women who realized the oppressive patriarchal cycles they were trapped in and the need to resist against the patriarchal hold and realize their rights. Ibsen's work inspired the belief that women cannot truly be themselves if they keep themselves trapped under the social dictations. They need to realize the oppressive attitudes directed towards them and come to the forefront to attain their rights.

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