Review

Re-thinking *A Doll’s House* : A study of Post-feminism

Amir Hossain

Department of English, IBAIS University (International Business Administration & Information System) /House# 13, Road# 35, Sector # 07, Uttara, Dhaka-1230, Bangladesh. E-mail: amir.ju09@yahoo.com, amir.hossain.16578@gmail.com, Tel: +8801915908306

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For long centuries, women in the traditional social order and system have always been considered subservient to men. In patriarchal Bourgeois society, the matriarchal community has been “humiliated”, “afflicted”, “silenced” and “tortured” socially, politically, culturally and economically. With the post-modernizing age, women began to see the universe with their own eyes and not through the male gaze. In this paper, the powerful woman character of that of Nora Helmer as impacted in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* has been focused on. Through this adventurous and revolutionary woman, my purpose is to reach the feminist message out to the post-modern generations. It aims to depict and examine critically feminist issues through portraying Nora Helmer who is the representative of not only the 19th century Scandinavian Bourgeois order and custom but also the universal feminism. She has raised a fiery voice or initiated a dreadful revolution against the traditional customs and gender discrimination with a view to equalizing human rights. In the play, the dramatist has prioritized the female domination and power more than the male pelf and rule. The aim of the playwright is to emphasize upon the female power with a view to repressing the male domination and tradition. Actually, the purpose of my paper is to focus on the feminist message as articulated in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. Considering the *femme fatale* character of Ibsen, the most renowned and powerful playwright, also known as the father figure of the post-modern era writing in Norwegian language, especially the powerful and domineering female protagonist cum heroine, Nora Helmer. This paper proposes to draw attention to the dramatic art as a paradigm of the post-modern feminism. This submission also attempts to uphold a comparative study of Nora, Clytemnestra, and Lady Macbeth as well.

Key words: *A Doll’s House*, Feminism, Ibsen, Nora, Torvald Helmer.

INTRODUCTION

Henrik Ibsen (20 March 1828-23 May 1906) was a major 19th century Norwegian playwright of the realistic plays. Ibsen is often referred to as the “father of modern drama” and is one of the founders of modernism in the theatre. Ibsen is held to be the greatest of Norwegian author, celebrated as a national symbol by Norwegians, and one of the most important playwrights of all time, and many regard him as a feminist author. Henrik Ibsen’s plays can be viewed as a gallery of portrait of various kinds of male and female through being trapped in societal realism and caught in the triviality of human life while struggling to seek truth and freedom out. Among Ibsen’s dramatic roles, the unusual Scandinavian women of strong characters are marked with great devotion towards their ideals and enormous resolution in pursuit of individual freedom and existence. They are actually bold, rebellious and revolutionary women warriors with independent and intelligent psychology and aspiration for the spiritual emancipation. According to scholars, Ibsen’s women characters may be classified into at least two categories. Since these women are classified into two categories, what are the characteristics of them? These two categories of unconventional and conventional women confirm to a “triangle theory.” One of the established critical approaches to Ibsen’s women roles is: a man is caught between a pair of opposing women, one is strong,
independent and deviant, and the other is weak, tame and obedient namely “the demon” and “the darling” opposites. The unconventional heroines are based on powerful personalities consisting of strong-willed, independent, intelligent and full of vitality. With their strong personalities, women are usually doomed to be trapped in a male – centred society where they are deprived of the basic right as human beings in its full sense. Ibsen has, insightfully, described a range of rebellious characters and unveiled the spiritual pilgrimage; they have gone through in their persistent pursuit of emancipation, freedom and in their bitter struggle to regain their identity as human beings. It was Ibsen who gave woman a vigorous and fairy voice through creating a powerful woman character, Nora Helmer in A Doll’s House (1879) with a view to breaking conventional custom and conservatism, and to focus on how women were viewed to the male gaze of his contemporary age. This submission also attempts to uphold a comparative study of Nora, Clytemnestra, and Lady Macbeth as well.

NORA AS A PARADIGM OF POST-FEMINISM

Here, in this paper, focus on Nora Helmer as a paradigm of the 20th century and the 21st century Feminism was as follows:

According to many critics, Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House is a manifesto of universal feminism. Through this play, Ibsen has earned popularity and fame as one of the leading playwrights in the modern era. To many, this play demands the appreciation. Again, on the contrary, it is mostly criticized play of Ibsen. Nora is one of the top of the topic and criticized female characters among Ibsen’s women. It may be expressed that Ibsen’s treatment of women has been impacted much through this character. With the passage of time, the play, A Doll’s House has been interpreting, translating, and staging in many languages of the world. Truly speaking, Ibsen has proposed the issue of woman’s empowerment through Nora. For this reason, we may fancy Nora as one of the powerful female characters. In this paper, my intention is to highlight Nora as the embodiment of power structure along with the post-feminism.

A month after the official birthday celebration being over, Ibsen and his wife Thoresen Ibsen were invited to a banquet in his honor given by the leading Norwegian feminist society. Ibsen’s speech at the Festival of the Norwegian Women’s Right League, Christiana (present Oslo), May 26, 1898 given as:

“I am not a member of the Women’s Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda. I have been more the poet and less the social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe. I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the Women’s Rights Movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this Women’s Rights Movement really is. To me, it has seemed a problem of mankind in general. And, if you read my books carefully, you will understand this. True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity. To be sure when ever such a description is felt to be reasonably true, the reader will read his own feelings and sentiments into the work of the poet. These are, then, attributed to the poet, but incorrectly so, every reader remolds the work beautifully and neatly, each according to his own personality. Not only are those who write, but also those who read poets. They are collaborators. They are often more poetical than the poet himself. With these reservations, let me thank you for the toast you have given me. I do indeed recognize that women have an important task to perform in the particular directions; this club is working along. I will express my thanks by proposing a toast to the League for Women’s Rights, wishing it progress and success. The task always before my mind has been to advance our country and to give our people a higher standard. To achieve this, two factors are important. It is for the mothers, by strenuous and sustained labor, to awaken a conscious feeling of culture and discipline. This feeling must be awakened before it will be possible to lift the people to a higher plane. It is the women who shall solve the human problem. As mothers, they shall solve it. And, only is that capacity can they solve it? Here lies a great task for women. My thanks! And, success to the League for Women’s Rights! (Johnston 2004: P.437)

His speech to the Norwegian Women’s Rights League notwithstanding, the younger Ibsen makes a number of claims which indeed qualifies him for the position of ‘social philosopher’. While making notes for A Doll’s House in 1878, he wrote: “A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society; it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsels and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view” (Finney 1994: p. 90). Bearing out this sentiment, in a speech delivered the following year to the Scandinavian Society in Rome, Ibsen urged that the post of librarian be filled by a woman and that the female members of society be granted the right to vote in the meetings. Even more politically charged was his support in 1884 of a petition in favor of separate property rights for the married women; in explaining why women and not men should be consulted about the married women’s property bill, Ibsen has commented that “to consult men in such a matter is like asking wolves if they desire better protection of the
sheep” (Finney 1994: p.90).

In The Modern Ibsen, G. Wilson Knight observes in Ibsen’s plays, the theme of respecting Women’s Rights features predominantly since women are the pillars of society. Ibsen, whom Hans Heiberg describes as “the champion of women’s causes,” is certainly influenced by his strong views on Women’s Rights at the time of writing A Doll’s House. Rolf Fjelde records that, when in February 1879 Ibsen’s proposal to the Scandinavian club in Rome that its female members be granted equal voting rights was narrowly defeated, he fiercely criticized the male majority. He challenged with them to assert that women were not in any way inferior to men in culture, intelligence, knowledge or artistic talent. Weigand, who describes Ibsen as “an ardent champion of Woman’s Rights” and an “apostle of freedom and individualism,” states that Ibsen’s indignation against organized society’s attempt “to keep woman in a state of virtual slavery” influenced his conception of the characters of A Doll’s House. Apart from Ibsen’s soft spot for the women’s cause, another factor which influences him when he writes A Doll’s House is, according to George Bernard Shaw, “the rising energy of the revolt of women against idealism.” The influence of gender issues on A Doll’s House is seen in Ibsen’s own “Notes for the Modern Tragedy.” Ibsen writes: “There are two kinds of spiritual law, two kinds of conscience, one in man and another, altogether different in woman. They do not understand each other; but in practical life a woman is judged by man’s law, as though she were not a woman but a man. The wife in the play ends by having no idea of what is right or wrong; natural feeling on the one hand and belief in authority on the other have altogether bewildered her” (Chilala 2002: p.109). In other words, as Bradbrook observes, A Doll’s House deals with the conflict of two worlds, male against female: “… the woman’s world of personal relationship and human values against the man’s world of legal rights and duties ….” (Chilala 2002: P.109). Ibsen’s preoccupation with women’s cause leads to his being wrongly thought to be a member of Women’s Movement. Ibsen, however, is never keen to join a movement of any kind, and is made it a point to clarify his position. It is difficult to know where to draw the line between what Ibsen has written purely as a poet, and what he has written to comment on gender issues of Ibsen’s contemporary Norway.

In The Modern Ibsen, Weigand writes of the turn-around in the story when Nora rebels: “We can follow Nora’s indictment of Torvald and conventional man-governed society with the most alert sympathy; we can be thrilled by her spirited gesture of emancipation; we can applaud her bravery; We can enjoy watching Torvald’s bluffed expression turn gradually into a hang-dog look of contrition he winces under her trouncing and gets worsted in every phase of the argument.” Nora feels that, in the male-dominated society which has treated her as a doll, her rebellion is justified, as is her forgery and little lies. The real crime, the real corruption, from her viewpoint, as Fjelde observes, “The male conspiracy to debase the female.” Nora’s rebellion is a way of demonstrating to Helmer that, contrary to what he thinks, and what she makes him believe of their eight years marriage, she can, in fact, do without him. She can actually help him, as she does with his treatment, instead of being a mere recipient of his provisions. Helmer wrongly believes that Nora is totally dependent upon him spiritually, intellectually, and materially. Cleverly, she plays along with his misconception, if only to divert his attention from the real source of money uses for his treatment. Weigand puts it in this way: “She very cleverly inculcates the idea in Torvald that she is dependent upon his counsel even in such matters as choosing a fancy dress” (Chilala 2002, p.111).

Generally, in marriages, the husband is stereotyped as the dominant force, the provider, the protector, and controller. The wife is, on the other hand, the weaker being, the dependent being and the humble follower. In strictly traditional settings, wives are not allowed to participate in major decision making. They only have to accept and go along with the decisions made on their behalf. Similarly, many women, especially those with no reliable source of income of their own, enter into the marriage bond believing that their husband is the one to provide security for their lives. Actually, Nora tries heart and soul to achieve her power and concealed identity. Ibsen’s Nora is an embodiment of the 19th century Scandinavian feminism. The prime aim of Nora is to get rid of the patriarchal norms and dominations. That is why, she hits upon a plan that by hook or by crook she must be able to gain her true freedom with a view to getting self-employed and self-reliant like a human being. In fact, Nora wants to see the unseen, and to know the unknown through her own inner eyes, but not through man’s eyes. In this way, we may realize Nora’s rebellion against the patriarchal order to gain freedom and power as impacted in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House.

A Doll’s House is no more about Women’s Rights than Shakespeare’s Richard II is about “the divine right of kings, or ghosts about syphilis ... It is theme which is the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she is to strive to become that person” (web), Ibsen portrays this behavior in A Doll’s House through one of the main characters, Nora Helmer by setting the scene in Norway in 1872. In the late 1800s, Women did not play an important role in society at all. Their job was mainly to cook, clean, sew, take care of family, and keep the house in order. They were treated as a material possession rather than a human being that could think and act for them and looked upon as a decorative member of the household. Women were robbed of their true identity, and at the end of the play, Nora leaves everything behind to go out into the world to seek her identity and freedom. This behavior can be traced back to the beginning of time when women were to stay home and gather nuts and
berries, while men would go out and do the hunting and fishing. The male always dominated over the female and it was not viewed as “unfair”. Male children would go to the school to get an education in history, mathematics, science, English writing, while the female would go to school to learn how to cook, sew, clean, and do household chores.

The male could advance his education by attending a college or university, whereas no college would accept a woman student. “The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of men towards women, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.” It was believed that women were the inferior gender and had to have special attention given to them. This idea dates back to the medieval period in history, and where the whole idea of chivalry came about and men having to provide special care. One can see that the idea of male superiority can be referenced back from the very early civilization to A Doll’s House was written. Women were very limited in their rights in 1872. Such rights included: women had to submit to laws when they had no voice in their formation, married women had no property rights, husbands had legal power over and responsibility for their wives to the extent that they could imprison or beat them with impunity, divorce, and child custody laws favored men, giving no rights to women and when they did work they were paid only a fraction of what men earned, they were not allowed to enter professions such as medicine or law, and they were robbed of their self-confidence and self-respect, and were made totally dependent on men. Ibsen makes references to this by using Mrs. Linden, widow and a friend to Nora. Linde’s husband died and left her penniless and being that her father passed away. She is able to apply for a position at Torvald’s bank. This is the only exception society made women in holding a job outside the household. It is apparent that women have come a long way since 1872, gaining the right to vote in 1920 under the 19th amendment in the constitution, gaining a right to an equal education, owning property, and having a job. These were all results of Women’s Rights Movement among others. Throughout the play, Nora plays the role of a typical woman in 1800s, staying by her husband’s side, taking care of children, and doing all the household chores. When she realizes that she is unfit to do anything in life and announces her remedy – “I have to try to educate myself” (Act III, P.165). She walks out of the door and expresses a deal of feminism universally agreed – upon base for women’s emancipation, telling Torvald that she no longer knows how to be his wife and no longer knows who she is... It was uncommon for women to walk out without their husband’s permission as they do today because they were taught since they were little to always please their husband and do everything in their power to satisfy and make him happy. This does not include walking out on this and leaving him with children. Nora does not know any better because she comes from being treated like a material object in her own house by her father, being treated like one by Torvald. Therefore, her whole life is based around other people making decisions for her and conformed to their way of thinking until the end of the play, when she walks out and makes her own decision. Nora shows her childish ways throughout the play by eating macaroons, by listening to Torvald’s negligence, and by romping with the children. It is apparent that she is confused about marriage and her role as a woman in the 1800s. She makes the right decision leave although society views this as an immortal thing to do.

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This was considered to be sinful: “God would punish you if you committed such an act of wrongdoing.” Women made an incredible appearance and played an immense role in today’s society. Women are, basically, treated with equality today with men. Ibsen’s play A Doll’s House is a very example of how life was like for women in the past, and they have, obviously, made progress since then. What women have done for today’s society will continue fighting this is never ending battle for equality until the very end as Nora has done. Many critics have pointed out that such an immature, ignorant creature could never have attained the understanding and revolutionary qualities that at the same time Nora leaves her home. Ibsen, however, has carefully constructed Nora so that her independent and farsightedness might have always shown through her adolescent capriciousness. Although her father and husband have, seriously, injured her practical education, she has retained enough native wisdom to confront an emergency. That she bungs the situation by a careless forgery provides credence to her independence of thought as well as to her lack of sophistication. This mixture of wisdom and childishness is her strongest quality. It enables her to oppose the knowledge of books and the doctrines of her worldly husband and to test by experience the social hypothesis which declares duty to the family is the most sacred. Only an innocent creature can be brave the perils of the outside world to her identity. Shocked audiences who objected to Nora’s solution of her marital status, and critics who considered her character unable to withstand the severe trial neglected to take account of the artistic truthfulness of the slammed door. One of the most common themes enduring in folklore and in less spontaneous works of art is the notion of the innocent journeying through the world to discover basic human values. The significance of these mythic themes is that only an innocent, fearless creature has the power of vision to see through false values of sophisticated society. In Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress, the story of Siegfried, Fielding’s Tom Jones, and even in Thomas Mann’s The Magic Mountain, we find the recurrent idea of youthful inquiry prevailing over worldly experience. Ibsen’s Nora, though deriving from a much closer and realistic setting, is raised to a mythic level as she accepts
her inevitable quest, the sacred pursuit of her identity, freedom, and power.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NORA, CLYTEMNESTRA AND LADY MACBETH

Here, a comparative analysis of Nora, Clytemnestra and Lady Macbeth as well. Clytemnestra is the *femme fatale* character in the *Oresteia*. She is one of the most powerful figures, indeed, in all dramatic literature. Homer gives only a meager statement for which she was universally known that she plotted with her lover to murder her husband. However, when we meet Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia*, we find her as vivid and fully developed personality as the great heroes of *Iliad*. Clytemnestra is not a murderess- the horrifying instrument of pitiless justice. She is also the mother of Iphigenia, and in that character, “a symbol of all wives and mothers who suffer from the inferior status of the women in the marriage” (Mahbub, 2012, p.49). She is driven to her murderous act “not only by love of Aegisthus, hatred of Agamemnon, jealousy of Cassandra; the deepest spring of her tragedy is the knowledge that she, who has it in her to be the head of a kingdom as well as of a family, can be freely ignored as a wife and outraged as a mother by a man she knows her inferior” (Mahbub, 2012, p.49).

Clytemnestra abhorred Agamemnon, argues R. P. Winnigton Ingram, “not simply because he had killed’ Iphigenia, ‘not because she loved Aegisthus, but out of a jealousy that was not jealousy of Cassandra, but of Agamemnon himself and his status as a man.’ *Agamemnon* is replete with instances of male superiority” (Mahbub, 2012, p.49). Clytemnestra was jealous of Agamemnon who went to Troy and returned as a victor. Meanwhile, she, being conscious of herself of having a towering personality, was left to perform womanly duties at the palace. But, she is of manly temper- “mannish woman.” It is true that she attempts to free herself; but we know that she is the personification of the ancestral curse and a puppet of gods. She has avenged the murder of Iphigenia. She declares avenger of Atreus, the cruel banqueter. Clytemnestra is, says Professor Murry: ‘conceived as being really possessed’ by the Demon of the House when she commits her crime’ (Mahbub, 2012, p.50). Actually, *Oresteia* deals with the relationship between man and woman and of the institution, of marriage. Against this institution, Clytemnestra revolts because her husband has violated the basis of mutual respect upon which the marriage should stand.

Euripides spoke explicitly for women in the person of Medea, who, like Clytemnestra, satisfied her indignation by murder. Aeschylus does not justify his murderers, any more than Euripides justifies his Medea or Ibsen his Hedda Gabler; but he reiterates the dangerous anomalies which must occur when in a social framework giving every freedom to men and none to women, a passionate and strong-willed wife confronts a weak but arrogant husband”.

Clytemnestra has often been compared to Lady Macbeth another *femme fatale* character of the dramatic world. Unlike Nora, both of them exercise their manly influence upon their husbands. Both of them plan, perpetrate, and exult in the preparation. Lady Macbeth instigates the deed; she would have done it Duncan had not looked like her father as he slept. Shakespeare’s creation is more feminine than that of the pagan poet because before the play ends, she is broken forever. But, Clytemnestra never falters in her resolution. When the deed is accomplished and the strain is relaxed, instead of yielding to historical collapse, she is superbly collected. Clytemnestra is unshaken; Lady Macbeth is broken by it. Shakespeare is painting human nature – weak and fickle even in the strongest. Aeschylus has shown us the wrath of gods, and which is simple, direct, and unrepentant. They are not like Nora. They are guided either by revengeful passion or lofty ambition or under the direct influence of supernatural agents, i.e. witches. But, Nora is concerned about individual freedom. She challenges authoritative power. She has a definite goal fight for liberation. Therefore, her aim is clear and definite.

Out of these four plays, four strong women arise, i.e. Antigone, Clytemnestra, Medea, and Lady Macbeth. From the very beginning of the play, *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is portrayed as an extremely strong female character that, undoubtedly, controls her husband’s thought and action. She orders Macbeth to become the king just as the witches have foreseen. Lady Macbeth’s burning ambition to be the queen drives her to the point of insanity. She stops at nothing to gain power; and she uses Macbeth as the enforcer for her plans. Antigone is fighting against the bad rule of the kingdom whereas Clytemnestra and Medea suffer directly by their husbands and indirectly at the hands of the Furies or, by the wrath of gods. Through their revengeful attitude, they suffer and act as the horrifying instruments of pitiless justice. But, Nora’s case is totally different. She is the first modern individual who, discovering the absurd position, fights against the unlawful law of the whole world. Unlike us, she does not only comprehend the consequences, but also takes steps to overcome her position, which is unique to Nora. Rebirth of her soul explains the necessity of rebirth of every individual’s soul-as also urged by the great philosopher, Socrates who says, “Know Thyself.” Nora is the first modern heroine who understands her demands, i.e., freedom of her soul. She wants to live her own life as a responsible human being. Nora’s exit is almost Medean in its delivery, although Ibsen’s text imbues its protagonist with sympathy. Besides, unlike Euripides’ titular character, Nora does not have to endure
lunacy to find freedom. Nora, the “doll,” now leaves her house and is free to “seek a fuller life as a human being,” being no longer a malleable doll under the control of her “master”. So, when Nora shuts the door behind her, she is not just a woman leaving her family. She is a human being seeking independence from the strictures if society and the rule of men, which is placed upon her because of gender. She is the representative of everywoman; illustrating the need of everyone, no matter what her nomenclature is for freedom. Like Nora, people live in a world of predetermined society and societal constraints that make them deprived of their freedom and happiness. Society wants people to live in according to the set rigidly norms and standards of society. Subjugation and oppression are the themes of society. Men and women are supposed to have played the role that is assigned to them. Nora finds herself in such a world of suppression. She can no longer surrender to the constraints of society. She attempts to become a femme fatale figure even though she is being locked in a male dominated world. She enters into a world of power. When Nora sheds her doll’s dress and steps out into the real world, she opens a new realm of possibilities of all women-of all human being. What Nora seeks after is nothing but the right to be a human being. She is the symbol of the liberation of the individual. She paves the path for everywoman. Now, it is their task whether to walk on or not in the path shown by her. Nora’s progress from a submissive housewife to an open-minded, independent woman represents not only power of her own soul, but also that of the future progress of human beings in general.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we may say that Ibsen has created Nora as a model of universal feminism, and an advent of self-sacrificing soul. To achieve her power and freedom, Nora becomes homeless voluntarily leaving her husband, children, and family. Through this character, Ibsen has not only created the female situation of the then Scandinavian Bourgeois Society but also upheld the illogical aspect of his mood before all. Ibsen’s female creation also symbolizes a big difference between patriarchy and matriarchy of the 20th century and 21st century feminism as well. In fact, the modern dramatist has created such type of character with a view to awakening a neglected female community around the universe. In A Doll’s House, Nora is shown as an embodiment of identity, freedom and power, rebellious protest against male dominated rule, and so on. This submission also attempts to uphold a comparative study of Nora, Clytemnestra, and Lady Macbeth as well.

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