

Rhetoric of Female Voices against Patriarchy in *A Doll's House*

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Abstract

This article tries to explore the female subjugation in Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House. Women confronts female domination, torture and other different domestic violence in different societies of the world in different ways. They get misbehaved and branded as secondary persons in the family in many societies of the world. They remain far from the fundamental rights in some cases. In many societies, they face economic, political, social and cultural upheavals. The protagonist of the novel Helmer treats his wife as a doll rather than a vital member of the family. He wants to keep her under his control in every matter of the family though she sacrifices her life for him wholeheartedly. Seeking emancipation in her family, Nora leaves her home, which marks the feminist voices against patriarchal domination prevalent in society. This article employs radical feminism proposed by Ti-Grace Atkinson. Society is a patriarchy in which the class of man is the oppressors of the class of woman. They oppose that the oppression of woman is the most fundamental form of oppression.

Key words: subjugation, feminism, gynocriticism, patriarchal, emancipation, ideologies, Patriarchy

Introduction

Feminist criticism advocates equal rights for women in a political, economic, social, psychological, personal and aesthetic sense. On the thematic level, the feminist reader should identify with female characters and their concerns. The object is to provide a critique of phallogocentric assumptions and an analysis of patriarchal visions or ideologies inscribed in a literature that is male-centered and male dominated. Feminism and feminist criticism is a concreted and self-conscious approach to literature. Toril Moi presents it as a movement for women's social, economic and cultural freedom and equality:

Feminist criticism, then, is a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical, practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature, at least not if the latter is presented as no more than another interesting critical approach on a par with a concern for sea-imagery or metaphors of war in medieval poetry. It is my view that, provided they

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arc compatible with her politics, a feminist critic can use whichever methods or theories she likes. There are, of course, different political views within the feminist camp. . . . (115)

Feminists feel that females are in fact made inferior not by nature but by social mechanism. Most thinkers, philosophers, scientists, leaders and prophets including gods being male, they have always given undue advantage to males over females. Aristotle opines that “the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities” and St. Thomas thought that a woman is “an imperfect man. (qtd.in Selden 134).

Feminism questions such long – standing dominant, male, patriarchal attitudes and male superiority in society . It attacks the male notions of value in literature and criticism. To subvert the complacent certainties of patriarchal culture, it offers critiques of male authors and representations of men in literature and also privileges women writers. There is strong affiliation between feminism and Marxism in that they are both opposed to social oppression. When feminism joins hands with Marxism or anti-racist movement or the like it acquires a political position. Catharine R. Stimpson comments on feminism :

Accepting such a theory as axiomatic, feminist critics have exerted their energies in three fields. They have first unraveled the thick tapestries of male hegemony, and unknotted networks of conscious assumptions and unconscious presumptions about women. . . ., Feminist critics have decomposed the representation of women in culture: the images, stereotypes, and archetypes. They have found woman as beautiful other, as aesthetic object whose power is that of eros, glamour, and fashion. They have found woman as mother, whose will and power, if checked and directed, will succor. . . . (273)

Kate Millet as a feminist, in *Sexual Politics*, examines how power relations work and how men manipulate and perpetuate male dominance over women. She argues that patriarchy is the cause of women’s oppression. She states: “ Partrichary subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male” (qtd. in Selden 137). In her analysis of social science, she says that sex is a matter of biology, while gander is a culturally acquired sexual identity. In social practice, for example, the boy is supposed to be brave and courageous while the girl is identified as meek, timid and obedient. These attributes are held as universal virtues and taken for granted owing to the male dominated power structures in the society.

One can find two distinct modes of feminist Criticism. The first is ideological which is concerned with the feminist as the reader. It offers feminist readings of texts which consider the images and stereotypes of women in literature. The second mode is the study of women as writers. It considers the history, style, themes, genres and structures of writings by women. Such a specialized critical discourse is also known as gynocriticism

and the critics are gynocritics. Gynocritics strive to define a particularly feminine content and to extend the canon so that it might include works by lesbians, feminists, and women writers in general (Seldon, 141) .

To Elaine Showalter, gynocriticism is concerned with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women. Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history; and, of course, studies of particular writers and works. She states: “The lost continent of the female tradition has risen like Atlantis from the sea of English literature” (qtd.in Selden 141). She holds that like the male writers, female writers too have a tradition of their own. Catharine R. Stimpson also views that one can use language as the main instruments to assault male hegemony and superiority:

[...] we cannot understand history, society or culture, Feminism and Feminist Criticism unless we graph the causes and effects of sex/gender systems. Such systems proliferate, foliate, and vary, but they have usually pushed down on women. The feminist critic must break such sex/gender systems, using language as weapon and tool, and then labor to renew history, society, and culture. Accepting such a theory as axiomatic, feminist critics have exerted their energies in three fields. They have first unraveled the thick tapestries of male hegemony, and unknotted networks of conscious assumptions and unconscious presumptions about women. (272)

Stimpson argues that females have become the objects of social domination, inferiority and suppression. She strongly protests against social stereotypes that view women as feeble and incapable beings. She suggests that feminist critics should employ the language as a weapon to subvert sex/ gender systems as language is also the medium through which the good news of women's vitality, integrity, and strength will travel. Feminism and Feminist Criticism each embodies its own sense of language. At times, women may speak or write only for themselves. Their motives may be weariness, fear, or insecurity. Whatever the cause, the effect is to reinforce an impression of the apparent solitude of language. At other times, women address only a significant other, or a tiny handful of others. Though they speak freely to each other, the closed circuit quality of their discourse perpetuates society's disdain, dismissals, and taboos.

In an article, *Women's Time*, Julia Kristeva advocates a deconstructive approach to sexual difference. The feminist struggle must be seen historically and politically as a three tiered one. Kristeva states that women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical :

In this attitude, which I strongly advocate - which I imagine? - the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to *metaphysics*. What can 'identity', even 'sexual identity', mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged? (qtd. in Moi 128)

Kristeva does not favor gender discrimination between male and female. As a social construct, gender differences make females weaker and less forward whereas it makes males stronger and bold. She subverts such differences and champions for women's identity and equality.

Feminist voices in A Doll's House

Henerik Ibsen in the play titled *A doll's house* exhibits a striking example of social protest against male chauvinism and domination. In this play, a typical housewife becomes disillusioned and dissatisfied with her condescending husband. Nora as a devoted wife forges her dead father's signature in order to illegally obtain a loan when Torvald Helmer becomes very ill. Since then, she has been paying back the loan in secret. She has never told her husband because she knows it will upset him. Unfortunately, a bitter bank employee named Nils Krogstad collects the debt payments. Knowing that Torvald is soon to be promoted, he tries using his knowledge of her forgery to blackmail Nora. He wants to insure his position at the bank; otherwise he will reveal the truth to Torvald and perhaps even the police. Nora tries to concoct ways to prevent Krogstad from revealing the truth. She has tried to coerce her husband, asking him to let Krogstad keep his job. However, Helmer believes the man possesses criminal tendencies. Therefore, he is bent on removing Krogstad from his post.

Later Torvald discovers Krogstad's incriminating note. When he realizes the criminal act that Nora has committed, Torvald becomes enraged. He fumes about how Krogstad can now make any demand he wishes. Trovald declares that Nora is immoral, unfit as a wife and mother:

HEIMER: [walking up and down] . Oh, what a terrible awakening this is. All this eight years . . . this woman who was my pride and joy . . . a hypocrite, a liar, worse than that, a criminal! Oh, how utterly squalid it all is ! Ugh! Ugh! I should have realized something like this would happen . I should have seen it coming. All your father's irresponsible ways. . . . Quiet! All your father's irresponsible ways are coming out in you. No religion, no morals, no sense of duty. . . . (78)

Helmer, in a moment of sheer hypocrisy, states that he forgives Nora, and that he still loves her as his little caged song bird . This is a startling wake-up call for Nora . In a flash, she realizes that Torvald is not the loving, selfless husband she has once envisioned. With that epiphany, she also comes to understand that their marriage has been a lie, and that she

herself has been an active part in the deception. She then decides to leave her husband and her children in order to find out who she truly is. Nora as a host of feminist voices revolts against her husband's domination and decides to desert her home:

NORA: . . . While I was at home with father he used to tell me all his opinions and I held the same opinions. If I had others I concealed them, because he would not have liked it. He used to call me his doll child, and play with me as I played with my dolls. Then I came to live in your house. . . I mean I passed from father's hands into yours. You settled everything according to your taste; and I got the same tastes as you; or I pretended to--I don't know which--both ways perhaps. . . ., You and father have done me a great wrong. It's your fault that my life has been wasted. . . . Listen, Torvald, from what I've heard, when a wife leaves her husband's house as I am doing now, he is absolved by law of all responsibility for her. I can at any rate free you from all responsibility. You must not feel in any way bound, any more than I shall. There must be full freedom on both sides. Look, here's your ring back. Give me mine. (88)

Nora deserts her home slamming her door behind seeking emancipation from family bonds and barriers, and male domination. She says: "I must take steps to educate myself. You are not the man to help me there. That's something I must do on my own. That is why I am leaving you (83) ." Nora is the mouthpiece of Ibsen, through whom he advocates liberty, equality, human rights and social justice for woman. When Nora closes behind her the door of her doll's house, she opens wide the gate of life for woman, and proclaims the revolutionary message that only perfect freedom and communion make a true bond between man and woman, meeting in the open, without lies, without shame, free from the bondage of duty. She decides to desert her family as she cannot tolerate what Helmer says:

Helmer : Now you have ruined my entire happiness, jeopardized my whole future. It is terrible to think of. Here I am, at the mercy of a thoroughly unscrupulous person; he can do whatever he likes with me, demand anything he wants, order me about just as he chooses...and I daren't even whimper. I am done for, a miserable failure, and it is all the fault of a feather brained woman. (88)

This is the true example of feminism as a social protest undertaken by Nora in the whirlpool of patriarchal cultures and ideologies. Ibsen demonstrates how females are made a puppet at the hands of males in a society and why a female like Nora revolts against it through this play. Nora feels that she has no position in her family. She has become Helmer's pet , one of his possessions. It is impossible for Helmer to see any situation from Nora's point of view. His kindness to her requires her to accept his lead in all matters. When Helmer reads Krostad's first letter, his violent reaction is a measure of the man. He condemns Nora without the slightest attempt to hear her side of the story. His references to Nora's father are particularly offensive. Therefore, Nora expresses her bitter feelings :

Helmer: Nora, how unreasonable.....how ungrateful you are ! Haven't you been happy

here ?

Nora: No,never. I thought I was ,but I wasn't really.

Helmer: Not.....not happy !

Nora: No just gay. And you have always been so kind to me. But our house has been anything but a playroom. I have been your doll wife, just as at home I was Daddy's doll child. And the children in turn have been my dolls. I thought it was fun when you came and played with me, just as they thought it was fun when I went and played with them. That has been our marriage, Trovald.

Nora raises her revolutionary voices against her husband's behavior and nature. She accuses him of making him a plaything. She does not want to be the doll at his hands. Like Ibsen, Parijat- a novelist raises feminist voices against male domination in society through her literary works. Parijat, in her novel *Shiriskoful (Blue Mimosa)*, depicts the feminist voices and the futility of human life. This novel echoes the grievances and agonies of a female engendered by patriarchal domination. Parijat contends that male chauvinism and social taboos against females are responsible for creating the absurdity of her life :

Absurd love and absurd people often go hand in hand. The existence of love is an absurdity and I too was hugging an absurd love in my breast. I was finding out that I had to endure life in a cobweb of pain, that I had to suffer. How difficult it was to get through this life. It passes in loss and emptiness, in getting nothing., there was no way, no place to express myself. My thinness made me look older. But what did I care if my years, my skin, my face wrinkled by trouble, made me look old. (48)

Parijat analyzes and portrays women's sexual psychology in most of her works and fights against the social injustice inflicted on women by male dominated social epochs. Her works infuse female consciousness and feminist voices against social aberration and anomalies including social injustice. She projects the echoes of female race which she represents herself. She expresses the meaninglessness of love and life: "When love and emotion die in a man, the man survives as nothing more than a machine (8)." She holds about the bitter experiences of life saying that she is living in an absurd world and in a great void. The voices Nora raises belong to the universal voices of female world as she blames her society and so called books for making women submissive and subordinate.

Conclusion

Henrik Ibsen portrays the patriarchal domination and subjugation in the play *A Doll's House*. Nora as the typical character of female domain revolts against patriarchal domination represented by Helmer in this play. The protagonist Helmer treats his wife Nora as a doll, not as a vital and independent member of his family. He forgets her sacrifice for him and his children. He urges her to be subordinate and submissive to him. Nora feels that she has become just like a puppet at the hands of her husband. She is nothing more than a play thing for her husband. Therefore, she decides to revolt against her husband's behavior and domination. Eventually, she leaves her home slamming the door behind him. This marks the female protest against male domination and insult ever prevalent in our society. Nora is an advocate through whom the writer propagates the importance of emancipation, equality and human rights in society. In many societies of the world, women have become submissive and subordinate to men due to male dominated social state. Until and unless women become economically independent at their families and politically forward in societies, they cannot empower themselves and raise themselves higher in their families as well as societies. The voices of other writers like Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter, Parijat etc. represent the voices of the voiceless ever existed in society.

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