

## THE PORTRAIT OF WOMEN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY PLAY: A STUDY OF HENRIK IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper explores the role of women and their rights in Henrik Ibsen's Doll's house play (1879). The paper will show how women are subordinate in her patriarchal society and how the system of marriage marginalized and oppressed women. It is stressing on the individuality of Nora and fights against all conventions which restrict the characters' personal identity and their freedom. In particular, Henrik Ibsen expands this outlook on women's position whose identity and freedom are usurped by the patriarchal society that is embodied in the character of Torvald. The status of women in the 19th century wasn't very good in society. Her decisions were usurped by her father, brother, husband, and later by her son. Women were considered as affectional and weak. They were not permitted to do anything and have just responded to take care of the children. Widows don't give any right to live and were forced to sit at their husband's funerals.*

### **Introduction:**

Literature reflects and expresses life, and the social condition in society to represent the community and the era (Wellek and Warren, 1977:110). Literature sources are the phenomena that occur in society such as family life (Wiyatmi, 2012:42). Portraying the elements of society that occur toward men and women are quite delightful because it shows the system of life both socially and culturally. One of the life issues that become the source of the literary works is the status of women in society.

European and American women in the 19th century lived in an age described by gender inequality. In the early century, women enjoyed few of the legal, social, or political rights that are now taken for granted in western countries: they could not elect, could not sue or be sued, could not witness in court, had extremely restricted control over personal property after marriage, were rarely granted legal sponsorship of their children in cases of divorce. Women were expected to remain dependent on their fathers and husbands. The main problem on which the drama *A Doll's House* is written is the problem of women. In particular, its theme is women's status in society and their dealings with men, the lack of true love and respect for a wife by a husband, and the lack of justice and dignity in the treatment of women in society itself.

*A Doll's House* is a flowering field for feminist criticism. Feminist critics have seen Ibsen as a social realist, a revolutionary writer, and a supporter of the restrained and oppressed women of 19th-century Norway and Europe. Actually, the play concerns a woman's right to individual liberty. Nora, like most women of our modern community, has all the inherent talents for evolving into a successful member of the community, as much as her husband or any man. Indeed, her critical mind, sense of equality, willingness to change, absence of dissemblance and narrow-mindedness in relation to what is called tradition, and other positive qualities would help her to make more advancement and participate in the development of her personality, her family and her community: if she is to get the opportunities and regard of her husband.

## Research Method

In writing this paper, the researcher employs descriptive qualitative research. Moleong (1983: 3) affirms that qualitative research which results in descriptive data in the form of observed people or behaviors. Then, the steps of conducting this qualitative study are (1) determining the object of the study, (2) determining the source of the data, (3) determining the method of data collection, and (4) determining the technique of data analysis. The object of the study is *A Doll's House* play which is published in 1879. It is analyzed by using the feminist approach. There are two types of data namely primary data and secondary data that are needed to do this research. The primary data are the main data obtained from all the words, dialogues, phrases, and sentences in the play. The primary data sources of the study are *A Doll's House* play by Henrik Ibsen. Secondary data are the supporting data taken from literary books, criticism, and some articles related to the play. The secondary data of the study are taken from any information related to the play. In conducting the study, the researcher uses the techniques in collecting the data as follows: reading the play repeatedly, taking notes of important parts in both primary and secondary data, underlying the important word, phrases, and sentences that are related to the study, arranging the data into several parts based on its classification, library research by collecting and selecting both primary data and secondary data, drawing the conclusion of the analysis that has already done in the former chapter and formulating its pedagogical suggestion. The technique of analyzing data is descriptive. The researcher wants to see the struggle of women in facing the patriarchal system and focus on it. There are two analyses, structural and feminist analysis.

After analyzing the play which is based on the data analysis, the researcher discusses the result of the research finding as follows:

Patriarchy is the social system in which positions of dominance and privilege are primarily held by men. In family life, a father is the head of the family. He holds power over women and children. In family life, the husband has big power in the family. Husband controls more basic materials in the family's necessities. The wife's status is weak because her life is under the control of her husband. In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen exemplifies a patriarchal system when Nora was a child. She became her father doll's child who played with him in his house

When I was at home with father, 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's child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls." (ADH: 66).

The patriarchal system is also embodied by Torvald who regards Nora as his doll's wife during their marriage. Nora feels that their home is just like playroom of her.

And you have always been so kind to me. But our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll's wife, just as at home I was father's doll child, and here the children have been my doll 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. (ADH: 67)

Feminism is a range of socio-political movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes. A feminist perspective has formed to figure out that women's status is equal to men's. Women have the right to get an equal placement as men in many aspects. Nora represented an equal status as a woman and man both of them are human beings without any differences. "*I don't believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are or at all events, that I must try and become one.*" (ADH: 68)

In the drama, women's position is also presented by Mrs. Linde. She has a figure of having worked hard for her family "*I had to turn my hand to anything I could find, first a small shop, then a small school, and so on. The last three year have seemed like one long working day with no rest*" (ADH: 11)

Women's status is not determined biologically, they can access the same position as men in terms of citizenship. Both of them have a right to grow themselves. Women's status is raised when they can challenge power, so their social status may make them hopeful about the possibility of realizing sexual equality in the world. Women's status and Ideological definition of women's roles often begins from the institutionalization of the division of power and work, and concrete aspect of life. Because the more separated productive activity is from domestic activity. Ibsen indicates that women's role is limited in the domestic area. Nora has always become an object in her community. She only has sacred duties, as a wife and mother "*Before all else, you are a wife and a mother.*" (ADH: 68)

In this play, the women's role is also exemplified by Nora who helps Mrs. Linde to get Work in her husband's office

Nora: He must, Christine. Just leave it to me. I will broach  
The subject very clearly. I will think of something that will  
Please him very much. It will make me so happy to be of some  
Use to you.

Linde: How kind you are, Nora, to be so Anxious to help me!  
(ADH: 11-12)

In *A Doll's House*, Nora fights for her own right which is not given by her patriarchal society but must be fought by her own. Nora has saved her husband's life from a serious illness. "*I will show you that I too have something to be proud and glad of. It was I who saved Torvald's life.*" (ADH: 12)

She considers that a wife could do everything to save her family's life. "*Linde : No, a wife cannot borrow without her husband's consent. Nora : Oh, if it is a wife who has any head dor business, a wife who has the wit to be a little bit clever.*" (ADH: 13)

Nora also does not think that she has no right to save her husband's life.

I really don't know. The thing perplexes me altogether.  
I only know that you and I look at it quite another thing  
from what I supposed, but I find it impossible to convince  
Myself that the law is right. According to it woman has no right  
to spare her old dying father, or to save her husband's life.  
I can't believe that." (ADH: 69)

Finally, Nora liberates herself from her husband's obligations.

Listen Torvald, I have heard that when a wife deserts  
her husband's house, as I am doing now, he is legally freed  
From all obligations towards her. In any case I set you free from  
all your obligations. You are not to feel yourself bound in the  
Slightest way, any more than I shall. There must be perfect  
freedom on both sides." (ADH: 71)

In *A Doll's House*, the character of Nora Helmer is subordinate in her community. She only becomes a wife and a mother "*My dear! Small household cares and that sort of thing! You are a child, Nora.*" (ADH: 12)

But Nora was so proud when she participates to save her husband's life and her family. "*I will show you that I too have something to be proud and glad of. It was I who saved Torvald's life.*" (ADH: 12)

In this play, women's participation is also presented by another major character, Mrs. Linde. She struggles to get a job and tries to enter public life. She finds a job and lives in a public area as a man. "*I had to turn my hand to anything I could find, first a small shop, then a small school, and so on. The last three year have seemed like one long working day with no rest.*" (ADH: 11)

The liberation of women have been taken out from granting contribution to the family and husband changes entering public life such as political participation and taking a part in the legal profession

and other social life which are usually dominated by patriarchy (Murphy, 1995).

### **Conclusion:**

After analyzing Ibsen's *A Doll's House* based on feminist point of view centralizes on women's issues in the play, Nora's struggle for freedom, and the considerable meaning beyond her success in getting independence in her life, it can be concluded as follows.

Firstly, a patriarchal system that is adopted by the community in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* provokes women's issues. In the play, there are two types of women's issues. Those are the strong patriarchal power and the weak portraits of women. Related to the strong patriarchal power, there are three limitations to women's freedom. They are the limitation to women's independence to decide to do anything, the limitation to women's liberation to express feelings over men's domination, and the limitation to women's liberation to decide an important thing. Concerned with the weak portraits of women, the main female character is considered incapable of doing household work and of deciding significant things in social life. As a result, they are not allowed to explore and develop their ability.

Nora as the main female character of the doll house play shows her ability to get her freedom. Her struggles discover her yearnings to struggle against domination and injustice toward women. Her struggles are against the strong patriarchal power. Here, by her attempts to prove her ability the meaning those women can do anything as men do and they are not second-sex people, who only fill the second-sex place in their society. She decides to solve her husband's problem by lending some money, earning money by working to repay the loan, showing her rigidity by speaking up against her husband's oppression, and getting the debt by forging her father's signature to get the surety of the bond.

Secondly, her struggles are against the weak portraits of women. She earns money to pay for the debt, giving her attention and affection to her children. Finally decides to leave her family as a result of her deep frustration because of her husband's negative response.

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