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A Doll's House : An Argument

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Abstract :

In the play, A Doll's House, Ibsen deals with the contemporary social issue : the status of women in the male dominated society. The play exposes the hypocrisy of the society where woman was treated as subservient to man which has been inherent in the culture and the attitude of the nineteenth century society. The play is a modern tragedy because it highlights the problem of modern women. Nora the heroin of the play is modern in the sense she voluntarily denies her traditional role of a doll wife and doll mother for the sake of gaining self-liberation, individuality and independence.

In the beginning of the play, we find Nora living in a doll's house without having ever been conscious that she was a doll. She realized her position in the house with Helmer's unexpected reactions to Krogstad's letters which revealed her secret debts . Being severely reprimanded by Helmer and later forgiven by him after Krogstad had returned the bond, Nora realizes that she has always been treated as an object in her house and that she has been rendering blind obedience to convention and custom in order to keep her husband happy. It makes her think that her husband is not the man she had expected to be. He has neither the moral courage to face Krogstad's challenge nor love for her to come forward and take the blame for her guilt on his own shoulders. She discovers that she is an individual in her own right, but that her individuality has remained dormant and suppressed for years. She tells Helmer that he has been treating her as his doll-wife just as her father treated her as his baby-doll. She tells him that their house has never

been anything but a play-room and that he has been playing with her just as she has been playing with her children. She decides to leave the house and says that she would like to know things at first-hand and for that she must go into the world all alone. Her most sacred duty, she says, is not for him or for her children, but for herself. By saying so, Nora makes her exit from the doll's house.

The author has shown gender specific roles in the form of Nora-Torvald relationship and portrayed it in such a way to illustrate the difference between conditional and absolute love. The play deals with the problem of maintaining an individual personality which is the feminine personality within the confined stereotyped social-role. Thus the play is said to be a feministic one as it articulates the female voice and it aims at woman's struggle for identity.

Key words : Contemporary, gender, stereotype, feministic, identity.

Introduction:

A Doll's House is perhaps the most famous and the best known of Ibsen's plays. He chose one of the burning topics of the day : Woman's place in the society and the way they are treated by men. In this choice he was no less influenced by his own convictions than the growing movement for the emancipation of women. His plays are notable for their intellectual and artistic appeal. They possess that quality of magic of ecstasy where the artist evokes souls by his art and his evocation produces independent spirits, who shows us not the author's ideas but the idea of life, illustrates the purpose and meaning of humanity. He has been a source of great influence for many playwrights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His influence on George Bernard Shaw is especially notable

In February 1879, he actually proposed at the Scandinavian Club that women members too should have the power to vote, and was greatly enraged when his proposal was struck down. It was at his insistence that the post of the paid librarian of the Club was thrown open to women.

When asked about his intention in the play, Ibsen claimed that the play was not a 'feminist' play; he said that it was a 'humanist' play. What Ibsen meant was that the theme of the play was the need of every individual, whether man or woman, to find out the kind of a person he or she really is and should strive to become that person. Ibsen meant that it was not about women only: his suggestion was that it is about justice to humanity in general. In fact, his sympathetic attitude towards woman was an off-shoot of his passionate belief in human freedom. He was drawn towards them simply because he felt that women in society were denied the rights and opportunities to grow like men. Ibsen in this play tries to probe the true basis of the man-woman relationship in its most intimate forms, namely marriage.

There is no doubt in the minds of the readers that 'A Doll's House' is a feminist play. It advocates the rights of women especially of wives in relation to their husbands. . It was the social drama or the drama of ideas which Ibsen particularly propagated. He wanted to show that if a woman is not allowed to establish her own identity and develop her own individuality, she can never be happy. The play has a message for society. It aimed to awaken a sense of individual responsibility among women.

When the play opens we find Nora leading the life of a pet with her husband. There is no doubt that her husband Helmer loves her, but the endearing expressions that he employs when addressing her clearly show that he regards her as a kind of pet. He uses animal terms to refer his wife Nora, as 'skylark', 'squirrel' and 'singing bird', which suggests that Helmer does not treat Nora as an equal, and treats her like a pet. Even more, he calls her a 'possession', as if she were

an object and not an individual with a separate identity. His use of demeaning terms highlights the society's norm of treating women as inferior. Moreover, Helmer is portrayed as a man having the power in their relationship, as he controls all the money and gives it to Nora as gifts.

Simone De Beauvoir in her book, 'The second sex' discussed the status of women. Throughout the history women have been underneath the men. The women themselves felt they did not have any identity of themselves and lived on the entity of either their father or husbands as being the "other". This refers to the people who are marginalized and are different from the superior self (of the male community). As such, Nora and other female characters in the play are the models of the 'second sex' or the 'other' who are marginalized in the society. What is difficult for the patriarchs to accept is that the "other" or "the second sex" are also capable of fighting back and securing a higher position for themselves in the society.

From a feministic perspective, the society at that time gives both the sexes stereotypical, social roles to play. It does not give them freedom to explore who they are and what they want to be. Nora and Helmer are faithfully conforming to their social roles. Nora, for example, fulfills the role of a responsible wife and mother. Despite attending her domestic chores at home she is neither appreciated nor recognized by her husband. She is not really satisfied, or self-realized. The role of wife and mother does not bring out all her potential. She, like a man paid off the debt which she had taken without the knowledge of her husband. She did it secretly because her role does not allow her to work like a man. It is, in fact the negative effect of confining men and women to stereotypical roles.

In the end, she realizes that she had been living with a stranger for the past eight years and finds that he never really loved her. Despite claiming to have done anything for her, he rebukes her of having ruined his life and also rebukes her character. Speculating about their future, he says

that they would only pretend to be married and snatches her right over her children. It is clear that she had taken loan and forged her father's signature to save his life, but he at no cost was ready to appreciate it and it was only when Krogstad sends back the bond, he had an emotional outburst. It is then, Nora realizes that such a man is not worth to be her husband and plans on discovering herself to escape from oppressive situation. She breaks away from the institution of marriage, leaving her children and tries to build her own identity and be respected as an individual in the society. She is no longer a doll. Her exit from her husband's house is a turning-point in her life and her exit can prove to be a beginning of new life.

Thus, it can be said that Ibsen wrote the play rather to free both the men and the women who were trapped in their gender roles during his period than writing solely for women's rights. He felt that there was need to revolt against the conventions and moral issues of society and he demanded justice and freedom for every human being and he wanted to inspire society towards individualism and free them from suppression.

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