



Power Struggle and Gender Clashes Between Masculinity and Femininity in Isben's *A Doll's House*



Dr. Anita Goswami

Assistant Professor

Department of English

(Iec University Himachal Pradesh, India)

Article Info

Volume 4, Issue 6

Page Number : 07-15

Publication Issue :

November-December-2021

Article History

Accepted : 09 Nov 2021

Published : 16 Nov 2021

ABSTRACT

According to feminist criticism, the roots of prejudice against women have long been entrenched in Western culture and ideology. Gender discrimination advocates such myths that the male is by nature superior, and female is inferior; and the one rules and other is ruled. These myths of gender and race distort the relations between women and men. In a world of male dominance, men are endowed with power for political and socio-economic reasons, and they manipulate their power to control their opposites to satisfy their masculine desires.

Henrik Ibsen, one of the leading modern playwrights, realizes the social problems arising out the marginalization of women of his age .His dramatic art exposes an in-depth exploration of familial, socio, cultural, economic, and psychological conflicts faced by women in everyday life. Ibsen has earned popularity and fame among audience, critics, reviewers, and scholars around the globe through shedding new light on his women.

The aim of this research paper is to focuses on Ibsen's plays in the light of his attitude towards female subjugation, marginalization, subordination, psychological trauma, dilemma, rights and suffrage of women, both in the contemporary society. *A Doll's House* is a blooming field for feminist criticism. The main subject or issue o which the drama *A Doll's House* is written is on issues of women's position in family and society. More specially, its subject is of women's status in the society and their treatment by 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 the society.

Keywords : Marginalization, Gender Discrimination, Subjugation,

Women Suffrage, Male Dominance.

The worth of civilization can be position of the women in the society. If you see the history of any country, if women of that country are uneducated, deprived of fundamental rights, marginalized and subaltern; the growth of that country is always uncertain. Definitely the modern era has brought a drastic change in the position of the women in every sphere of life. Thanks to those female novelists, critics and theorists all over the world who imitated feminism as movement for the equality of the women. It was a very difficult to establish the place of women equal to men. If we focus the history of the feminism first we have make the observation of British History. In this reference first we should understand the meaning of the word Feminism.

Feminism is often described as a class struggle against all form of gender –based discrimination that deprived of women of the opportunities for self promotion and equality with men simply because they are women.

If we talk about women's experience they often felt themselves subordinated, discriminated and oppressed. Not only today but medieval and ancient period also. If we the great Scholar like Aristotle 's views are very depressive about women's status in society: "The relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and of ruler to be ruled. 'So this statement shows that by nature women are submissive, weak and irrational. They need to protect and guidance, either father or husband on the other hand. On the other hand Charles Darwin has also quoted that "A man is always intellectually superior to women in logic and reason." But these views were challenged to 18th century.

There was great change arose in America and Britain in the field of political, Economic and social sphere. The demand of Equality, Liberty and Fraternity took place in the form of human rights. French Revolution (5th may 1789-9 November 1799), American Revolution (1765-1783) and Glorious Revolution (1688) in England are responsible for the distribution of political rights.

People considered themselves as a citizen. The faith in monarchy was broken. The social and political powers were distributed but the benefits of citizenships were only associated to men not in women, children and slaves. They were put in second rate of citizenship. Discrimination on the basis of gender was approved by the society in political, economic and social field. There was no challenged for

Divine right of Patriarchy. Philosophers told that women have no reason for politics. Therefore women interests were presented by the male writers.

But this myth was soon challenged by Mary Wollstonecraft, English writer and social worker. She wrote a book "A Vindication of the Rights of the Woman" in 1792. In this book she highlighted some problems related to women like women should be equally treated as men as well demand for education of women. So it started first wave of feminism (1848-1920). It demanded for equality and end of discrimination. This demand took the shape of a movement as Seneca falls convention in 1848 (U.S.A.) 'Declaration of Sentiment'. (Demand for full citizenship like men). Then the next movement right for the vote is known as 'The Women Suffrage Movement' in the United States. It took activists and reformers nearly 100 years to win that right, and campaign was not easy: disagreement over strategy threatened to cripple the movement more than once. But on August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the constitution was finally ratified, enfranchising for the first time that they, like men deserve all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. So the key features of the first wave feminism are – Discrimination- Solution-Emancipation

and approach was-Equality The first wave Feminism focused on External Restriction but this movement ends with faulty assumptions that political equality will never bring social, educational and economic equality for the women. Therefore the second wave of feminism took birth with the book of Betty Freidan American feminist writer and activist.

She published a book 'The Feminine Mystique' in 1963 which gave a radical approach to the second wave of Feminism. In this book she has focused on certain issues concerned to women's life that it is a misconception that is women are always happy with their family life. Their duty is only to nurture family and house. Through her writing she questioned on that myth and mentioned that women are unhappy and dissatisfied with their family life. They are not only made for domestic life. They want to participate in social spheres. They should also avail equal opportunities in education and work sectors. Like first wave feminism, second wave of feminism also started some movements for the welfares of the women – Betty Friden, the founder of the National organization for Women(NOW), protest raised again the objectification of the women, and Freedom Trash can.” In this way second wave Feminism focused on the oppression of the women in pariaarchical society.

They also discussed on internal restrictions. They demanded to bring change in the society because external restrictions are visible but A cadmic study of Feminism was started with “The Second Sex” in 1949 written by Simone De

Beauvoir. She wrote on Gender Discrimination in that book she has written,” One not born woman but rather becomes woman.” She says that sex is a natural construct but gender is constructed by the society.”The women are always treated inferior to man in every concern of life. The female are always put as binary position and other. In this book she also mentioned that family is also responsible for gender discrimination. There is also a famous critic, Kate Millet also wrote a book “Sexual politics” in which oppression gender has been discussed. Therefore second wave of feminism constituted a social class or t form” Sisterhood” on the common experience of oppression

But in the second wave of Feminism, one group of women was neglected who was oppressed on the basis of caste, class, culture, race and ethnicity. They were subaltern and marginalized. In the second wave of feminism their pain was invisible. The second wave feminism was limited only to the interest of White middle class of American and white women. Then there was an arrival of third wave of feminism, which was influence with Postmodernism. The third wave of feminism adopted plurality and multiculturalism. Rebecca Walker,, daughter of Alice Walker, the African –American writer who coined the term “womanism”. born in Jackson, Mississippi, coined the term "third-wave feminism" in 1992. Walker Both first-wave and second-wave feminism represented movements that existed alongside, and at times in tension with, civil rights movements for people of color — a slight majority of whom happen to be women. But the struggle always seemed to be for the rights of white women, as represented by the women's liberation movement, and black men, as represented by the movement. on the other hand from first wave feminism to third wave of feminism, Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Cultural Feminism, Gynocriticism, Marxist and social Feminism. And third wave of Feminism, brought Postmodern Feminism, with the new compounds like black Feminism, Asian-African Feminism, Postcolonial Feminism, Lesbian Feminism, Ecofeminism, and Islamic Feminism and Dalit feminism got eminent position. In post modern era a subaltern class of the women also got voice and direct platform in the society.

Henrik Ibsen (20 March, 1828-23 May, 1906) was a major 19th century Norwegian playwright. Ibsen is renowned as the “father of modern drama.” Today he is considered to be the greatest Norwegian author and is celebrated as a national hero by the Norwegians. However, there was a time when Ibsen was an object of criticism and condemnation not only in his contemporary Norway, but also in the continental Europe, and in the conservative bourgeois society in particular. It is Ibsen who has given women a vigorous and strong voice through creating some powerful female characters like Nora Helmer, Mrs. Alving, Hedda Gabler, and Hilda Wangel.

Ibsen’s female characters are eminent in merit, intelligence, firmness, and integrity, in comparison with the males. It is widely believed that his plays deal with social conflicts, dilemma of freedom and necessity, marriage problems, unwed motherhood and divorce, hypocrisy of the church, career and family, freedom and fairness in expression of salvation, vicissitudes of human life, universal rights, and suffrage of women in the modern society. Ibsen’s women are excited in sexuality, self-conceited in appearance, and agitation caused by the demand of the bourgeois society they encounter in everyday life. He wants to show us how women fall victim of sacrifice in spreading predominance of power and freedom from the lower stage to the higher level of the masculine society.

He is a forerunner in exploring the notion of woman’s self in gendered relationships in his major plays. He creates an array of interesting female characters in a predominantly male society. Women, in the 19th century Scandinavian societies, were constantly subjugated and marginalized by the members of the patriarchal society. On the whole, this submission attempts to focus on the categorization of Ibsen’s women, treatment of women and contemporary Scandinavia, role of motherhood, and literary criticism of his powerful women.

According to critics and scholars, Ibsen’s plays can be viewed as a gallery of portraits of various kinds of men and women through social reality and psychological trauma while they are determined to struggle for seeking truth and freedom. His women characters outshine their male counterparts by winning the hearts of both readers and audiences, by demonstrating great courage in times of crisis, and in face of adversity. His strong women characters are marked with great devotion towards their ideals and enormous resolution in pursuit of individual freedom and existence.

They are actually bold, revolutionary women warriors with independent and intelligent psychology and aspiration for spiritual emancipation. They endure great pains to defend dignity and rights as human beings rather than subservient to the male dominated society. An Ibsen heroine, like Nora Helmer, Mrs. Alving, and a fascinating one, Hedda Gabler, is first and foremost a human being, rather than merely a woman. The word “woman,” in fact, implies the “role” intended for her by the society or man, who sets norm for her. She should be weak, gentle, comforting, caring, tame and obedient while for those unconventional women characters through possessing strong, intelligent, ambitious, resolute, and irreconcilable personality. From Ibsen’s contemporary age to the present; they are supposed to be the source of inspiration for today’s women socially, economically, politically, and psychologically.

While we study Ibsen’s play-texts, we are immediately impressed by his women characters that bear the testimony of strong personality incomparable with social conventions. Generally, Ibsen’s women

characters are of two categories. One of the critical approaches to his women characters 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.”

Thus Ibsen’s heroines naturally fall into “demonic” or unconventional category. He unconventional heroines are based on the powerful personalities consisting of strong-willed, independent, intelligent, and full of vitality. In some cases, they are sexually passionate, erotic, proud, temperamental, highly demanding, and easily bored with trivial daily matters. With the strong personalities, they are confined to a male centered society where they are deprived of basic right and suffrage as human beings in its full-vigor.

Since society is based on the patriarchal structures and dominated by the patriarchal rules, it is simply not in such a society, a concept such as “individual” is gendered in terms of the male gaze. A female individual is assigned with all her duties and obligations directed by the patriarchy. Men dominate over the “male-centric” world, while women have to be obedient and subservient. They are usually bound in matrimony, functioning as either toys or tools to serve others. In serving this, obligation is embedded in their social and female identity while their identity as human being with the right to happiness, and freedom is almost completely sacrificed. In such a patriarchal social framework, they are represented by a set of self-sacrificing and subservient attributes; those who break away from this norm are labeled with such tags as “deviant,” “rebellious,” or even “demonic.” Most of his women suffer from this labeling as victims of the male dominated society for their rebellious spirit. Ibsen insightfully describes a range of rebellious characters, and unveiled the spiritual pilgrimage; they have gone through their persistent pursuit of emancipation, freedom, and bitter struggle to regain their identity and power as human beings.

This three-act play by Henrik Ibsen takes place entirely within the house of the Helmer family. Torvald Helmer, the father, is a lawyer who has just received a promotion to work at a bank. His wife, Nora, is excited about his new position because she thinks it will relieve the money problems that they have had in the past. They have three young children who are looked after by a nanny. Torvald doesn't like Nora to work, but she does occasional sewing. He often treats her like a child in the way he speaks to her and thinks she doesn't understand adult concepts of money and work. The story takes place during Christmas time, so they are often decorating the house or planning parties. Kristine Linde arrives at their house, an old friend that Nora hasn't seen in ten years. Mrs. Linde is all alone, having lost her husband and her mother, for whom she had been caring. Nora gets the idea that her husband can offer Kristine a job. Then Nora reveals a secret to Kristine that she has never told anyone. About eight years earlier, her husband became very ill, and the doctor suggested they move to Italy, so Nora needed to borrow some money to be able to afford it. Women could not take out loans on their own, so she forged her father's signature on the documents because

her father was near death. Ever since then, she had been slowly scaping together money to pay back the loan.

After Kristine leaves, Krogstad, the man Nora borrowed the money from, coincidentally arrives at the door. He says that he understands that her husband is about to become his new boss at the bank. Krogstad then confesses that he knows Nora forged her father's signature on the loan, which constitutes fraud. She worries that he will reveal the information to her husband. When her husband finds out that Nora has been talking to Krogstad, he chastises her for talking to a man of such ill repute. In fact two Nora is once again talking to Mrs. Linde. They discuss Dr. Rank who is an old family friend. Torvald tells Nora that he has decided to fire Krogstad in order to hire Mrs. Linde. Nora knows that this news will upset Krogstad, so she tries to convince her husband not to do it. Nora speaks to Krogstad again and offers to give him all the money that she owes him; however, he doesn't want the money, he wants respect. He wants her husband to not only give him his job back but give him a better job. Krogstad tells Nora that he is leaving a letter in her mailbox for Torvald explaining what Nora has done. When Krogstad leaves, Nora asks Kristine if she can talk to Krogstad about retrieving his letter then Nora tries to keep her husband from finding it by asking him to help her practice dancing the tarantella for the upcoming party.

In fact, Mrs. Linde has found Krogstad, and while she's talking to him about retrieving his letter, it comes out that Kristine and Krogstad once had a relationship. Kristine had to leave him for a more stable prospect, but since her husband has died, she would like to get back together with Krogstad. Krogstad is overjoyed at this news and says he will retrieve his letter, but Kristine tells him not to. She says that Torvald needs to find out about Nora's secret. Kristine returns to tell Nora that Krogstad won't be getting his letter just after Nora dances at the party. Nora's husband joins her, and then Dr. Rank stops by. He leaves his business card with a symbol on it that indicates he is going to lock himself into his house until he dies. Torvald is upset and takes the mail to go read it.

After he learns the news, he runs back out of his office to find out from Nora if it's true. She says they need to sit down for a serious conversation. He insults her, completely disappointed in her decisions, blaming her father for her bad morals. Then a new letter arrives from Krogstad. It contains the contract and says that he is letting them off the hook. Torvald is elated and tears up the letter. He tells Nora he forgives her, and he will take close care of her in the future. Nora, however,

explains to him that she needs to leave him. She is disappointed with the way she has been treated by men in her life. She needs to live on her own in order to discover who she is and what she believes. Torvald is appalled that she would leave her own children, just as audiences as the time would be, but Nora says she needs to do what is best for her. Torvald wonders if she will ever come back to him, and she leaves it open as a possibility.

According to Kaufman, in a world dominated by men, the world of men is, by definition, a world of power. That power is a structured part of the economies and systems of political and social organization; it forms part of the core of religion, family, forms of play and intellectual life. On an individual level, much of what we associate with masculinity hinges on a man's capacity to exercise power and control. Men enjoy social power and many forms of privilege by virtue of being male. Torvald lives in a world of men's power because of his privilege of political and economic position in the society that ensures him the capacity to exercise power and control over public and domestic life associated with women, especially his wife Nora. According to Kiberd, "Ibsen's account of the sufferings of couples who reject the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, only to face more daunting social and personal problems in their attempt at an honest sexuality, seemed ...the central issue of the age" (Kiberd, p. 63). These "problems" derive not from their everyday domestic chores, but from their struggle for power of control in the ideological realm.

This struggle is progressing under the façade of proper relationship between husband and wife in the first part of the play, but is involved in a series of conflicts between the characters and finally develops into a life-and-death struggle for their social and political role. It seems that Torvald does not experience great inner conflicts during his confrontation with his opponents. But there are moments when he experiences great mental pain in his exercise of this power. As a newly appointed manager of the bank, Torvald enjoys prestige and political power outside his domestic life. But his unsuccessful dealing with his wife brings him fear and anxiety about his political life. When he reads Kroonstad's letter and finds out his wife's secret, he senses great horror. His emotional outbreak to Nora "You have destroyed all my happiness. You have ruined all my future" (Ibsen, p. 60) is not a display of his power, but rather, a revelation of his weariness, and what's more, a proclamation of his ready surrender to his opponent in the power struggle. We can sense the gradual loss of masculine power from Torvald in this scene, bit by bit, until everything comes to a complete stop. When the second letter from Krogstad comes, "I (Torvald) scarcely have the courage to do it" (Ibsen, p. 61), which is a full display of his abnormal psyche of fear of losing the battle. Though self-conscience comes back to him when he finds the bond in the letter and is thrilled for being "saved", he is unaware of the tragic future awaiting him.

As what he has been used to do, he wastes no time educating his wife and still remembering to display his masculine generosity to allow Nora stay in the house: "I have broad wings to shelter you under. How warm and cozy our home is, Nora. Here is shelter for you; here I will protect you like a hunted dove that I have saved from a hawk's claws; I will bring peace to your poor beating heart" (Ibsen, p. 62). I cannot help feeling sympathetic with such a pathetic figure of Torvald now, who still lives in his illusion of male dominance when he himself really needs some protection. What is more pathetic of him is his ignorance of the unfavorable situation he is conditioned. When Nora announces "I am going away from here now, at once" (Ibsen, p. 64), Torvald still struggles and clings to his masculine power: "I won't allow it! I forbid you!" (Ibsen, p. 64) and blames Nora for deserting her husband and children. But, believe it or not, as Kaufman states,

"the challenge of feminism to men is one of dislodging the hegemonic masculine psyche. This is not a psychological interpretation of change because it is the social challenge to men's power and the actual reduction of men's social power that is the source of change." (Kaufman, p. 25). As matter of fact, the

process of the struggle of power is not as important as compared with the consequences it has brought to both the male and female characters. Considering the ending of the power struggle reflected in the play, men's lose of power is not without some tragic elements. Nora's final exit is a good example of feminism that challenges men's power and brings immense pain to men who are still ignorant of the loss of their power, which gives rise to men's bewilderment in face of reality, that despite their effort to safeguard the realm of men's absolute power over women, Torvald has fought vigorously a battle with their female counterparts in hope of achieving success in maintaining their masculine power and obtaining control over their counterparts. However, Torvald's practice of power does not help him to fulfill his perception towards reality, but makes him alienated from it.

According to Kaufman, in a world dominated by men, the world of men is, by definition, a world of power. That power is a structured part of the economies and systems of political and social organization; it forms part of the core of religion, family, forms of play and intellectual life. On an individual level, much of what we associate with masculinity hinges on a man's capacity to exercise power and control. Men enjoy social power and many forms of privilege by virtue of being male. Torvald lives in a world of men's power because of his privilege of political and economic position in the society that ensures him the capacity to exercise power and control over public and domestic life associated with women, especially his wife Nora.

According to Kiberd, "Ibsen's account of the sufferings of couples who reject the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, only to face more daunting social and personal problems in their attempt at an honest sexuality, seemed ...the central issue of the age" (Kiberd, p. 63). These "problems" derive not from their everyday domestic chores, but from their struggle for power of control in the ideological realm. This struggle is progressing under the façade of proper relationship between husband and wife in the first part of the play, but is involved in a series of conflicts between the characters and finally develops into a life-and- death struggle for their social and political role. It seems that Torvald does not experience great inner conflicts during his confrontation with his opponents. But there are moments when he experiences great mental pain in his exercise of this power. As a newly appointed manager of the bank, Torvald enjoys prestige and political power outside his domestic life. But his unsuccessful dealing with his wife brings him fear and anxiety about his political life. When he reads Krogstad's letter and finds out his wife's secret, he senses great horror. His emotional outbreak to Nora "You have destroyed all my happiness. You have ruined all my future" (Ibsen, p. 60) is not a display of his power, but rather, a revelation of his weariness, and what's more, a proclamation of his ready surrender to his opponent in the power struggle. We can sense the gradual loss of masculine power from Torvald in this scene, bit by bit, until everything comes to a complete stop.

When the second letter from Krogstad comes, "I (Torvald) scarcely have the courage to do it" (Ibsen, p. 61), which is a full display of his abnormal psyche of fear of losing the battle. Though self-conscience comes back to him when he finds the bond in the letter and is thrilled for being "saved", he is unaware of the tragic future awaiting him. As what he has been used to do, he wastes no time educating his wife and still remembering to display his masculine generosity to allow Nora stay in the house: "I have broad wings to shelter you under. How warm and cosy our home is, Nora. Here is shelter for you; here I will protect you like a hunted dove that I have saved from a hawk's claws; I will bring peace to your poor beating heart" (Ibsen, p. 62).

I cannot help feeling sympathetic with such a pathetic figure of Torvald now, who still lives in his illusion of male dominance when he himself really needs some protection. What is more pathetic of him is his ignorance of the unfavorable situation he is conditioned. When Nora announces “I am going away from here now, at once” (Ibsen, p. 64), Torvald still struggles and clings to his masculine power: “I won’t allow it! I forbid you!” (Ibsen, p. 64) and blames Nora for deserting her husband and children. But, believe it or not, as Kaufman states, “the challenge of feminism to men is one of dislodging the hegemonic masculine psyche. This is not a psychological interpretation of change because it is the social challenge to men’s power and the actual reduction of men’s social power that is the source of change.” (Kaufman, p. 25). As matter of fact, the process of the struggle of power is not as important as compared with the consequences it has brought to both the male and female characters. Considering the ending of the power struggle reflected in the play, men’s lose of power is not without some tragic elements. Nora’s final exit is a good example of feminism that challenges men’s power and brings immense pain to men who are still ignorant of the loss of their power, which gives rise to men’s bewilderment in face of reality.

REFERENCES

1. Abel, Elizabeth, Barbara Christina, and Helen Moglen, eds. *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. Print.
2. Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversions of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990. Print.
3. Bertens, H. (2001). *Literary Theory, The Basics*. Routledge.
4. Gray, R. (1977). *Ibsen, a Dissenting View*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Ibsen, H. (1959). *Four Great Plays by Henrik Ibsen*. Batam Books.
6. Johnston, B. (1989). *Text and Supertext in Ibsen’s Drama*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park and London.
7. Kaufman, M. (2000). Men, feminism, and men’s contradictory experiences of power. In A. Minas (ed.). *Gender Basics. Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men (Second Edition)*, Wadsworth.
8. Kiberd, D. (1985) *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature*. London: The MacMillan Press Ltd..
9. Kondo, D. K. (1997). *About Face. Performing Race in Fashion and Theater*. Routledge. McFarlane, J. W. (ed.). (1962). *Discussions of Henrik Ibsen*, D. C. Heath and Company, Boston.
10. Sanday, P. R. (1981). *Female Power and Male Dominance on the Origins of Sexual Inequality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
11. Thomas, D. (1983). *Macmillan Modern Dramatists, Henrik Ibsen*. London: Macmillan Press.
12. Weigand, J. H. (1960). *The Modern Ibsen, A Reconsideration*. E. P. Dutton & CO., INC.