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ISSN (Online) : 2455 - 3662  
SJIF Impact Factor :5.148

## EPRA International Journal of **Multidisciplinary Research**

Monthly Peer Reviewed & Indexed  
International Online Journal

Volume: 4 Issue:11 November 2018



**Published By :**  
**EPRA Journals**

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**EPRA International Journal of  
Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR)**

**SOCIAL ORDER AND CULTURAL CHAOS IN  
PROTECTING WOMEN RIGHTS: IBSEN'S DOLL HOUSE**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Considering the social context of the time, there is no doubt that Ibsen's play sent a ripple of upheaval through the European and American social structure. Nora's decision to leave her seemingly perfect life as a doll and venture into the real world was no doubt dumbfounding to the contemporary audience. According one source, "At the turn of the century physicians used Nora, whose mood changes from joy to depression in short cycles of time, as an example of female hysteria" (Henrik). Rather than attributing Mrs. Linde's surrender to social norms with her desire to assume the role of Krogstad's doll to the constricting, unforgivable social traditions and practices of the time, Krogstad found her past behavior of independence and hard work a manifestation of "a women's hysteria" (Ibsen 64). The idea of female hysteria didn't solely apply to explain Mrs. Linde's behavior. Many interpreted the hysterical shifts in Nora's moods as understandable "because she wavers between the person she pretends to be and the one she maysomedaybecome"(Linnea). True to Ellis's predictions, social change was around the corner for the gender situation among the middle class. The play, along with other historical factors, helped stir the movement for women's rights. At the time, women were neither allowed to pursue higher education nor substantially vote or assume more than basic property rights. "They were expected to be passive, no matter what their true personality was" (Linnea). Even if Mrs. Linde was allowed to work, she found herself "completely alone in the world, and feeling horribly empty and forlorn" (Ibsen 64). This shows that the push for gender equality would be difficult because of deep-seeded traditions and prejudices against independent women. There is no doubt that this atmosphere and Ibsen's close relationships with many women during his lifetime contributed to his desire to write ADoll'sHouse.*

**KEYWORDS:** *social structure, Doll's House, culture, intelligence, Women's Rights League, contemporaries*

## DISCUSSION

It was easy enough for the growing feminist movement at the time to label Ibsen as a feminist. In fact, Ibsen had been active in several activities to try to bring about more gender equality in his town. At one town council meeting he tried to get the paid job of librarian to be open to women; in his letter he stated, "Is there anyone in this gathering who dares assert that our ladies are inferior to us in culture, or intelligence, or knowledge, or artistic talent?" (Meyers 449). Additionally, *A Doll's House* paints a sympathetic picture of the plight of women, as seen when Nora, in response to Torvald's exclamation that her first duty was that of a wife and a mother, reveals "I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are—or at least I'm going to try to be. I know most people agree with you, Torvald, and that's also what it says in books. But I'm not content any more with what most people say...I have to think things out for myself" (Ibsen 82). Consequentially, after the release of "A Doll's House," feminist groups such as the Norwegian Women's Rights League to throw a banquet in his honor (Templeton 110). Templeton goes on to explain how "for Ibsen's contemporaries, the sophisticated as well as the crude, *A Doll House* was the clearest and most substantial expression of the issues composing the 'women question.' From the 1880's on, the articles poured forth" (Templeton 126). One of the feminists' major arguments in portraying Ibsen as pro-women's rights was the theme of liberty for Nora. She is deeply rational and pitiable because of her practicality as well as her identifiable yearning for individuality and self-fulfillment. For example, as she leaves she tells Torvald, "when a wife leaves her husband's house as I am doing now, he is absolved by law of all responsibility. You must not feel in any way bound, any more than I shall. There must be full freedom on both sides" (Ibsen 85). According to Errol Durbach in Ibsen's Myth of Transformation, "the idea of 'liberty' in his drama is inseparable from the liberal ideology that inspired the revolutions that reshaped the social structure of Europe and America at the end of the eighteenth century" (Durbach). This implies that the social movement that led to a revolution for liberty in America and places in Europe like Norway at the time was seeping into the realm of women's rights. While the critics jumped at this development and weaved Ibsen into the feminist movement, Ibsen fervently began to clarify his intentions for the public opinion. Other contemporary social groups were not so eager to give *A Doll's House* a positive connotation. Indubitably some people felt that "a play that questioned a woman's place in society and asserted that a woman's self was more important than her role as a wife and mother, was unheard of. Government

and church officials were outraged" (Linnea). It wasn't the blame for the rising divorce rate that got Ibsen to give in but some German theaters wouldn't even allow the play to be performed; thus the alternate ending "in which the heroine rebellion collapses" (Linnea). Perhaps the image of Torvald drowning in despair, sinking "down on a chair near the door, and cover[ing] his face with his hands," trying to dream up the "miracle of miracles" that would save his house from collapse but being unable to because of the way society nurtured his beliefs and thoughts was too unjust (Ibsen 86).

It was only after the creation of the alternate ending that the play became famous around the globe. Nevertheless, Ibsen couldn't accept that his plays be labeled feminist. He thus fervently tried to clarify his views on freedom for expression in women. First, Ibsen attempted to clarify the position of the critics and counter "whatever propaganda feminists may have made of *A Doll House*...[Ibsen] never meant to write a play about the topical subject of women's rights" (Templeton). Ibsen supposedly had other intentions in mind in portraying Nora's conflict. He considered himself a "poet of truth and of the human soul" (Templeton). In this way, he preferred to be called a humanist (Linnea). His observations of social roles include viewing the woman's realm as "values, feelings, and personal relationships" while the men's realm was "laws, legal rights, and duties" (Linnea). Although Nora's lack of understanding the consequences of forging a signature, even for a good cause, makes the central conflict the individual's duty to herself, Ibsen in general "had little patience with people, male or female, who didn't stand up for their rights and opinions" (Linnea). In this way, Ibsen's thematic portrayal of the plot in *A Doll's House* makes its humanist, rather than strictly feminist, purpose justified.

In this third act of *A Doll's House* a new truth begins to dawn on Nora, as Krogstad's letter about Nora's forgery in an I.O.U. reaches her husband, Torvald Helmer. Nora had borrowed money from Krogstad to finance the family's travel to Italy as her husband was seriously ill and he had been advised living in a warm climate. Nora had forged her father's signature as security as she had wanted to save her father (who was also seriously ill and he had died a little later) from the

painful knowledge of the condition of his daughter's family. This had happened eight years ago, and Helmer knew nothing of it. Now Krogstad threatens and blackmails Nora (with the letter) to Helmer revealing Nora's forgery, as Krogstad is dismissed from a bank job and Helmer is the new Manager of the same bank. Krogstad hopes to gain power over Helmer, and not only get back his job but climb up in the bank. Even as Helmer disappears, and

the I.O.U. is returned with apology and Helmer wants Nora to continue to live with him as his “songbird,” “skylark,” “squirrel,” etc. But meanwhile Nora has undergone a far-reaching change. She cannot be diverted from the revelation she has had.

Nora tells him :

You don't understand me. And I've never understood you-until this evening ... You

and I have got to face facts, Torvald ....

Does it occur to you that is the first time we two, you and I, man and wife, have ever had a serious talk together ?...

A great wrong has been done to me, Torvald. First by papa, and then by you....

It's the truth, Torvald.[10]

And she goes on to comment how her father treated her as a doll: “He called me his little doll, and he played with me just the way I played with my dolls”(p.96). Thenshe “passed into” her husband's hands. With inexorable logic Nora's speech continues:

... our home has never been anything but a playroom. I've been your doll-wife, just as I used to be papa's dill-child. And the children have been my dolls. I used to think it was fun when you came in and played with me , just as they think it's fun when I go in and play games with them. That's all our marriage has been, Torvald.(p.96).

When Torvald wants her to stay on to educate the children, she tells him:

I'm not fitted to educate them. There's something else I must do first. I must educate myself. And you can't help me with that. It's something I must do myself. That's why I'm leaving you... I must stand on my own feet if I am to find out the truth about myself and about life.So I can't go on living here with you any longer.(p.97).

The question that has been troubling her: “Has a woman really not the right to spare her dying father pain, or save her husband's life?” needs to be answered. No appeal to books, religion, sanctity of family, or question of conscience can stop Nora from seeking her freedom and truth.

She has a duty towards herself:

“I believe that I am first and foremost a human being, like you (Torvald) –or anyway, that I must try to become one... I must think things out for myself, and try to find my ownanswer”(p.98).

Shortly Nora leaves, slamming the door on Torvald's home. This preoccupation with the truth of human relationship that constitutes marriage is the aspect of Ibsen's naturalism revealed in A Doll's House.Overall, Ibsen's work created a social backlash with those opposed to the feminist movement. While women's groups eagerly stacked up praises and honors for Ibsen,

he fervently tried to disassociate himself from the feminist movement and satiate the critics with “humanist” rather than “feminist” intentions. His creation of an alternate ending to save himself from vituperative critics proves the extent of social upheaval created by his play in the context of the women's rights movement in Europe and America.

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