

# Realism and Idealism in A Doll's House

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**Abstract:** *A Doll's House, has dealt theme the conflict between the innocence and experience. This play, which was created by a visionary, a mystic, a philosopher, an idealist, an individualist, shook the whole Europe. Ibsen, a moral and social rebel, is acknowledged to be an ardent supporter of women's rights. But he was not a feminist in the traditional sense as his objective was to depict life and its problems realistically and objectively.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

A Doll's House, has dealt theme the conflict between the innocence and experience. This play, which was created by a visionary, a mystic, a philosopher, an idealist, an individualist, shook the whole Europe. Ibsen, a moral and social rebel, is acknowledged to be an ardent supporter of women's rights. But he was not a feminist in the traditional sense as his objective was to depict life and its problems realistically and objectively. He was against all those aspects of contemporary living that obstructed the free self-realization of an individual's personality hypocrisies, conventions, fear of social criticism, rigidities, bigotries of institutionalized religion and all those factors, which, under the guise of duty and loyalty or moral obligation, stop the growth of the personality and inhibit the natural development of the individual and shut him off from genuine living. Ibsen was interested in freedom which is something personal a matter of individual responsibility. He disliked outdated attitudes and opinions which he found inappropriate for the new individual. He was anxious to revise current thinking about what one owed to oneself. He clearly pointed out that a concern for himself was one of the supreme duties of a person. Again and again he returns to the idea that our society is essentially false, that it lives by a set of traditional lies and carefully hushes up everything that might reveal their falsity. It is a society which has no real principle except that appearances must be saved at any cost. He stood vehemently for freedom from all instruments of human servitude, the codifications of law and the dogmas.

Hosen, a philosopher, has used drama to ask questions rather than supply answers to them. He had faith in man's capacity for good, (a Wordsworthian influence). He had belief in human perfectibility and possibility of improvement. Being an individualist and an idealist he had faith in potential integrity of man's dignity and self-respect. His plays insist that marriage is a union of souls, an association by free choice and held together by mutual trust.

Ibsen has tried to interpret the unwritten laws of the mind. Ibsen's humanism was thus based on not only his faith in the equality of the sexes but also on perfect understanding between them. Like Virginia Woolf he contributed something original to the cause of women's emancipation and their rights. He felt that it was desirable to solve the problems of women's rights along with others but that had not been the whole truth. His task had been the description of humanity.

A Doll's House, after its first presentation was celebrated most for its social theme the emancipation of woman. Men felt ashamed of themselves. Selfish, egocentric males felt hurt. Any discussion about this play was strictly prohibited at parties and social gatherings. Females, naturally felt elated.

Ibsen and the modern audiences of A Doll's House consider its importance to lie in its concern for the true basis of wider human relationships. Whether Nora Helmer has the right, whether she is justified as a woman to leave her husband, home and children, is of secondary importance to the significance of leaving them as a seriously thinking individual human being.

Ibsen considers it to be humiliating and degrading for a woman to live together when one refuses to accept the other as a socially responsible individual with independent ideas. That Nora could have some serious thought was something unbelievable for Torvald Helmer. For him independent action was undesirable in wife.

Nora had been a doll-wife living in A Doll's House playing with her doll-children. When the "wonderful thing" (the words which are symbolic and ironical) did not happen, when her husband failed to support her in a crisis

and turned against her as an "unscrupulous", "irresponsible" woman, she realized that her whole life with her father and husband had been a doll-life. Her own personality had been subjugated and her worth as an individual completely ignored. The revelation that "before all else I am a reasonable human being" required decisive step. So Nora left her husband and children in order to learn for herself the conditions of the world "to see who is right, the world or I".

Ibsen uses the word "home" symbolically for the home-country, the home town, the family etc. A Doll's House analyzes such "home conditions" of the conventional organizations of domestic and legal affairs. Leaving home, for a bright lad, is an essential part of the process of self-assertion, a necessary step on the way of self-reliance. To escape from home is to win release from the place that stunts one's growth, stifles one's breath, distorts one's values and ruins one's opportunities.

Ibsen himself was in this special sense a homeless person, a voluntary exile. He insists that contact with the outside broadens the mind and liberates the spirit. The domestic aspects of "home" are thus taken up and scrutinized in A Doll's House. Here "home" is seen as an institution tending to inhibit the development of the authentic self. For a child to be treated by his or her father as Nora, was to suffer a complete eclipse of personality. As the title echoes, it is to endure becoming a doll for the gratification of others. For the married woman of Nora's day the home could be as disabling as it is for the child. For Nora finds herself to just a home-comfort, a luxury, something flattering the male-ego of the husband at the cost of destroying hers. She becomes a possession, a property. A self-respecting woman has no other options to advance on her way to self-reliance but to quit her home.

For a man Helmer says, "there's something indescribably moving and very satisfying in knowing that he has forgiven his wife". It is as though it made her his property in a double sense. He has given her a new life and she becomes in a way, both his wife and at the same time his child. So immediately marriage becomes a microcosm (a miniature representation of the system of the male-dominated society at large, at which a woman can not be herself. It is male-society with laws drafted by men and with male counsels and justices judging feminine conduct from male point of view. Nora's inbred faith in authority and in male-domination clashes with her natural instincts making it a drama of inner conflict. Ibsen, by such devices builds up his case against the 'home' as the source of hypocrisy, bigotry, blurred vision, and possessiveness, the place that confines. Strange things happen to truth in such surroundings perversions, the garbling and dissembling and pretence

Suppression, Nora's "big secret," is of course the pivot about which the action turns. Exploited by Krogstad, shared with Mrs. Lynde and withheld in terror from Torvald's and Rank's mortal secret is similarly a matter to share with some and withhold from others.

Secondly both Torvald and Nora need the opiate of day dreaming to help them to bear the reality of their lives, Torvald indulges himself with the pretence that he and Nora are secretly in love, newly-wed and Nora dreams of a rich admirer who will leave her all his money.

While they knowingly daydream, they also unknowingly deceive themselves. Torvald with the image of himself as the broad-shouldered courageous male longing only for the opportunity to save his wife from distress; and Nora with a belief that her marriage is a source of genuine happiness when in reality it is nothing but a hollow sham. All the time she is acting a part up to the role of an irresponsible scatterbrained that her marriage seems to have cast her for, masquerading as the helpless little doll so utterly dependent on her strong-willed husband.

The entire manage (domestic establishment) is based on misrepresentation, deception and falsehood in small thing as well as big. It was a fraud that had to be exposed. Nora's crime is sublime one as she wants to transgress the insensate and unsympathetic laws. created by male dominated society. Her deeper motives are admirable and honourable.

Isen's grasp of the intricacies of female psychology is miraculous. The mystic in him gave him a sensitive understanding of the mysterious invisible life of woman. His knowledge of woman is intricate and accurate. Women, he opined, should not be judged by man's laws as their psyche is different from that of men (they are more intuitive than men). Thus like John Stuart Mill, Ibsen was a moral and social rebel, a great humanist, a critic of traditional morality, social laws and institutions. He felt the need of a revolution in human psyche, and was a psychiatrist curing the diseases of the soul. He was a dramatic poet of the individualistic side of man's nature. Individual, according to him, could try to become an admirable human being without the help of society. He felt that woman had not been considered to be an individual possessing a soul. Therefore, he defended her cause vehemently. The quality of fearless

individualism makes Ibsen's women strange and distasteful to many people. Such fallacies have been built about women particularly in plays and novels. In most of the fiction, women were either good or bad. But to treat woman as a rounded human being was not in vogue. Ibsen has presented rounded women. Being a man of learning and knowledge he knew the mysteries of woman's inner self.

The women of saga, their wild, deep nature, fascinated him. Sharpness, warmth, strength crept into many plays of Ibsen a combination of ice and flame. Susanna, Ibsen's wife was an embodiment of saga womanhood. In *A Doll's House* Nora reminds us of saga women. She is wild and deep, possessing warmth, strength and intuitive bent of mind. She asserts her independence by finally leaving her husband. This bold step stirred up such controversy that Ibsen felt called upon to suggest an alternative ending.

*A Doll's House* is a true story of Laura Keiler who had borrowed money for her husband's treatment and had kept it a mystery. Ibsen persuaded her to tell it to her husband. She was divorced as borrowing was considered to be unwomanly and illegal. It annoyed Ibsen to the extent of fury. Thus was created *A Doll's House* which shook the whole Europe. "Everything", Ibsen says, "that I have written, has the closest possible connection with what I have lived through even though it has been my personal experience". He derived his intensity from his dreaming and solitary self. The theme chosen by him has a close connection with the adventures of his soul.

Nora has been called an infantile doll-wife who has failed to grow up. She has been condemned to be childish and immature. She has been misunderstood due to the lack of visionary insight. Children can be more than mere puppets. They are individuals. "Child", to Wordsworth, is "father of man" and may prove to be astonishingly brave and devoted. Children are innocent and unwordly capable of loving much more intensely than the elders. There dwells God in their hearts. There is that innocence in Nora which has been eulogised both by Blake and Wordsworth

When Torvald's health and life depends on a journey South, Nora finds the money by forging her father's signature. To her eyes, with a woman's commonsense and directness, a feigned signature seems in such circumstances a mere formality for her father would surely have signed had he not been at death-bed. For repaying that debt she copies documents in secret and saves half her dress money. Is this immaturity and childishness? Some critics have wrongly suggested that Nora really wanted a Mediterranean holiday for herself and was merely romancing her husband's illness.

Children's direct clear vision is not necessarily foolish. The Greeks, said the old Egyptian priest, are always children. Yet the Greeks were no fools. Wise simplicity of children has been admired in the Gospels. The ideal is not for either partner to keep the other as pet nor for both to become competitors. True marriage, something sacred, is partnership and companionship.

The drama ends with Nora's departure. Whether she succeeds in finding the answers to her questions and becoming the individual she feels she is meant to be is not revealed to us.

Ibsen once said: "A dramatist's business is not to answer questions but merely to ask them."

*A Doll's House* is one of the best examples of question asking. Are duties to husband and children more sacred than duties to oneself? Does the individual have the right and freedom to do what Nora did? The answer must come from the audience.

Ibsen used the language which could reveal the inner recesses of human mind the depths and mysteries which are unrevealed even to characters themselves. The action of *A Doll's House* is tense, exciting and fast. Both a fine sense of action and a careful character development are combined in this play to make it one of the most popular of Ibsen's plays.

*Doll's House* is a remarkable play because there has been presented in it a remarkable saga woman with wild, deep nature possessing warmth, strength, sharpness, innocence, and self-respect who awakens her responsibility as an individual; and as a result throws off the yoke of subjugation imposed on her by her selfish, shallow and egotistical husband. She had a self which combined in it reason and intuition. Nora is an emblem of love and sympathy and therefore of light. Her heart is pure in which a lamp shines. Purity and sincerity of heart is a light which God introduces into the heart. It has been said by a great saint:

"Knowledge is not the multiplicity of information. it is a light which God introduces into the hearts of his servants".

This "light" is the key to most of the secrets ie, the secrets of Self and of the Universe. It is the "inward light". Gnostics regard it as the essential reality of man. They say that 'the refined element' (called heart) is the essential reality

of man. Nora's self-respect born out of this light the purity of heart makes her sublime her moral strength and courage enhance that sublimity.

A Doll's House has a great relevance in the present age when man has lost his intuitive, feminine self hence the increasing materialism and masculinity in today's modern world. Man has lost his intuitive self, his soul. Humankind is oblivious of this fact now-a-days that woman is the creator of life upon this earth (as it has been said in the Mahabharata), that womanhood and motherhood ought to be respected and revered deeply and sincerely. The real aim of Ibsen in writing this play was to teach a lesson to the egotist, self-centred, shallow, ignorant, narrow-minded, uncultured men, the humane lesson of equality, liberty and fraternity. Helmer, being one-sided, and egotist, could not at all identify himself with his wife whom he pretended to love. His was not a balanced and integrated personality. While Nora comes to know about the lack of balance, of moral courage and strength, of the power and capability to protect, she gets disillusioned and disheartened. Her heart breaks. Then in moments of distress it became impossible for a woman like Nora (who possessed a harmonious personality, was a pure soul) to live any more with a weak, fragmented, disbalanced man as Helmer was. She yearned for a whole man, an entire man who could love her deeply and sincerely and who could be strong enough to protect her, to defend and save her in moments of crisis. Helmer was incapable of supporting her. When she realized and reached the conclusion that Helmer was not a protective master, an ideal husband, she left him, his home and children and she was right. That was the only way she could save her soul and preserve her sanity, equilibrium, peace and serenity of her mind

Ibsen, through this play emerges as a great Humanist, a visionary, trying to establish a relationship of his own soul to society. He loved humanity immensely, possessed a balanced personality and yearned for the deliverance of mankind. His message took the form of A Doll's House which has been having a great impact on the minds of people since it was created.

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