

# Henrik Ibsen and his a doll's House as a Feminist Play with reference to Feminism

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## **Abstract**

*Henrik Ibsen was the dramatist, essayist and novelist who did not get fame in his early works. But after the publication of A Doll's House he is considered as a great writer who has written the plight of women in such a way that readers get sympathized with the main female character of the novel, Nora. Nora is the central character of the novel that lives with his husband and three children happily. Because of her early mistake of taking loan with Krogstad makes her threatened. In the end of the play, she walks out of the house and goes out with no fix destination to find her individuality. A Doll's House is definitely a feminist play, though Ibsen has denied about this. Ibsen presents the question in front of readers to think about the solutions which he has presented in this play. In this research paper an attempt would be made to about the feminist characteristics of the play with special reference to feminism.*

## **Key words:**

Feminism; feminist; individuality; women; problem; forgery

## **Introduction**

Henrik Ibsen was born in 1828 in the small Norwegian Timber Port of Skien. This place is at a distance of about a hundred miles from Christiania, the capital of Norway (the city of Christiania is now known as Oslo). Henrik Ibsen's father was a businessman importing and trading in a variety of goods. When he was seven years old, his father suffered heavy losses and they shifted from fashionable home in the town to a humbler

lodging a few miles out of the town. One thing which is very interesting and shocking to note that an impression had been created that Ibsen was an illegitimate child. It was said that a man, who later became a member of parliament, had an affair with Ibsen's mother and Ibsen was a product of that illicit sexual union. His play contains several illegitimate or supposedly illegitimate children. This seems to present his impression of illegitimate child.

At the age of fifteen Ibsen left school and got employed at a medical shop. He worked for six years in this shop. He worked very hard and on the side also did other works. One thing which is worth to mention is that, he found time to study for his matriculation examination. His interest was in painting. In fact, his earliest ambition was to become a painter. While he was in medical shop at Grimstad, he developed an affair with a servant girl who was ten years older than him. Ibsen had to pay compensation to her on a regular basis for as long as fourteen years as the girl became pregnant. The child who was born was illegitimate, a curious coincidence between this birth and Ibsen's own supposed birth. During his stay at Grimstad he also produced his first play, *Catiline*.

Ibsen passed matriculation examination and he joined Christiania University. He now felt more and more interest in the theatre. He tried to pressure Government for funds to keep the new venture of National Theatre going. When Ole Bull, a musician, came to know of Ibsen's interest in the theatre and

also of the fact Ibsen had already written a couple of plays, he offered Ibsen a job at the National Theatre, which Ibsen accepted, even though the salary was not very attractive. Thus, at the age of twenty three, Ibsen left Christiania University and settled down at Bergen, the head quarter of the National Theatre. He promoted on the post of artistic director in Christiania. He was very happy here as compare to the city of Bergen. He married with a Pastor's daughter named Susannah, who was nineteen years old. The girl was not very beautiful, like a tomboy.

As Ibsen did not get much success in his starting plays he found it necessary to earn his livelihood by writing hack poems, those are written purely to earn money. Disappointment drove him to drinking and he became an alcoholic. It was a common sight for people to see him lying drunk and helpless in the gutter. His many applications to the government for a writer's pension were repeatedly rejected. His play did not give him much appreciation initially. *The Pretenders* gave him some respect and also some money through pension. The pension was not large but enough to keep him and his family.

He now took a drastic decision. He made his mind to leave Norway. He went to Rome and lived there for 27 years self-imposed exile. He wrote some poems in form of a play which proved a huge success and for the first time he made money in his life.

When Ibsen was 61 years old he fell in love with a eighteen years old Viennese girl named Emile Bardach. He agreed with her proposal to go away with her. But, when he returned from there to Munich, Ibsen backed out of the plan. He thought about his wife who supported him throughout his life. He kept writing warm letters to her for some time. However, the affair led to nothing. In sexual matters he seems to have been very hesitant and timid.

On his seventieth birthday in 1898, Ibsen received presents from a group of English admirers including G.B. Shaw, Thomas Hardy, J.M. Barrie and many more. After completing his last work, *when we dead awaken*, he had the first of several paralytic strokes which were to incapacitate him. He spent his five years virtually paralyzed and unable to write. He died in 1906 at the age of seventy eight.

#### Doll's house

This play tells the story of the married woman named Nora and his husband named Torvald Helmer. Torvald Helmer is a lawyer who lives with his wife and three children. Nora and Helmer have been married for nine years. Nora has been keeping a secret from him all these years. When Helmer fell critically ill and had to shift to a warm climate for treatment and recovery, Nora borrowed some money from a man, Nils Krogstad, a clerk at a local bank, and forged her father's signature on the promissory note of guarantee of the loan. Now, Helmer is going to take a high post on that bank in which Krogstad is working. Krogstad, who is threatened with dismissal from his post tells Nora that he would reveal her secret to Helmer if she does not prevail upon Helmer to let Krogstad keep his job. Nora thinks that when her husband would know her secret he would come forward to take blame for her criminal act of forgery on his own shoulders. But after knowing about the forgery, he begins to scold her in very harsh manner. Krogstad withdraws his threat, but Nora has now discovered the true nature and character of her husband. She tells her husband that she loves him no more and cannot live with him any longer. She walks out of the house, slamming the door behind her.

#### Feminism

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), a French novelist and essayist, started a movement with her book 'The Second Sex'. She raised

some issues and problems, and seeking solutions to gender problem in a patriarchal culture organized in the favor of man. This is known as feminism. Feminism is not a particular 'ism'. It deals with the problems related to gender issues. To present the real picture of women in the society is the main focus of feminism. The history of struggle for women's social, cultural and political equality has its start in the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Marry Wallstone Craft highlighted the problem of inequality in her book "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" in 1792. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century some male writer like John Stuart Mill and Fredrich Engeles wrote about the problem of women status in society.

But the real precursor of feminism was Virginia Woolf. She raises the issue of obscurity, social inequality and lack of opportunity to woman as painfully and overtly. Elaine Showalter also wrote about this and in her essay "Towards a Feminist Poetics" she tells about the three stages of feminism.

#### Doll's house as feminist play

Doll's house is a problem play. It does not give any solutions of the problems with which it deals. But it is not the dramatist to offer solutions. It is on the readers. In this play also Ibsen presents a problem in front of readers:-

"What is the position or status of a woman vis-à-vis her husband and her home?"

If we read this novel we cannot find that this play deals with the rights of woman in general. It does not advocate the emancipation of women. It merely shows us the sad consequences of the control of her husband. This play focus our attention on the conjugal life of a middle-class couple and presents in front of us the relationship

existing between the husband and the wife and the possible consequences of that particular kind of relationship. The play deals with the life of a married woman. Husband controls his wife and supersedes her in all aspects of life. Ibsen presents the real position of women after marriage. Ibsen is definitely on the side of Nora in this play; and she wins our sympathies too. Thus it would not wrong to say that A Doll's House is a feminist play, even though Ibsen himself refused to accept this description of the play.

When play opens, we see Nora working and leading the life of a pet in her husband's house. Although, Helmer loves his wife but the attitude towards his wife clearly show that he regards her as a kind of pet. He calls her on several occasions as little skylark and little squirrel which symbolizes that he is the master of the home and she is only the pet who lives in this house. He leaves no doubt in her mind that he is the master of the house. It is true that he gives advice about the spending money on household needs in a very gentle and loving manner, but he is very firm about it. He reminds her that her father was a spendthrift and expresses his views that she has inherited her habit of extravagance from her father. When Nora asks about the job of Krogstad he tells her firmly that he in no mood to fix him on his job. On this occasion he speaks with such an air of conviction that Nora trembles to think of her own criminal act of forgery and begins to fear that she too may be corrupting her children and poisoning he home.

Nora believes that her husband loves her a lot. She tells doctor Rank that her husband would sacrifice his life for her without the least hesitation, if necessary. She thinks about Krogstad's threat. She firmly believes that, if the worst happens, Helmer would take her whole guilt upon his own shoulders. When Helmer found himself in danger, he began to accuse Nora of having ruined his happiness and damaged his whole future. Thus, Nora finds out that both his love for

her and his moral values have collapsed in the face of a crisis in their life.

As a consequence of her discovery of Helmer's true character, Nora decides to leave Helmer. She tells him that first her father and then he had wronged her. When she was with her father she adopts the views and opinions of her father and when she was with her husband she adopt the views and opinions of her husband. Now, she wants to establish her own identity. Although, she loves her husband and her children, but first and foremost she is an individual. She wants to think things out for herself, and gets things clear. She tells Helmer that she has stopped to love him because he is not the man she had thought him to be. She does not want any further dealings with Helmer. She takes back her wedding-ring and steps out of the house, slamming the outer door behind her.

#### Conclusion

There is no doubt in our minds that A Doll's House is a feminist play. It advocates the

rights of the women, and especially of wives in relation to their husbands. Ibsen himself denied that he has written this novel for the claims of women. He did not write this novel for social purpose and he had never actively worked for the movement for the rights of women. Ibsen tells in his play that we should find our inner character i.e. individuality. One should not live accordingly to other views or opinions whatever may be the relation is, father or husband. A Doll's House ends with the heroine leaving her home, her husband, and even her children to go and face an uncertain future in a world about which she knows next to nothing. It is the woman in the play who wins our maximum sympathy.

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