CHAPTER 2

HENRIK IBSEN’S A DOLL’S HOUSE

Henrik Ibsen is one of the famous Norwegian playwrights who is known for his nationalistic spirit and also known for exploring Europe’s social problems in 1800’s. He is quite well known for creating strong female characters. Ibsen is universally regarded as one of the creators of the modern drama. His contribution to the theatre was manifold, he has broken the social barriers which had previously bounded it. In fact he is the first one to show that the tragedies could also be written about the ordinary people and in everyday prose or language. His second contribution was that he has thrown away the artificialities of the plot, (Shakespearean dramas). His greatness was not due to his technical achievements in his plays but due to his deep study of depth and subtlety of the human character. His early plays were wild and epic, utilizing an open form and concentrating on mystical, romantic, poetic visions of the rebel figures in search of an ultimate truth which is just out of reach.

His first four plays are The Pillars of Society (1877), A Doll’s House (1879), Ghosts (1881), An Enemy of the People (1882). These plays are generally described as sociological dramas. These plays deal with social problems even though Ibsen announced that his plays deal with individuals and human relationships. Ibsen has called this play a modern tragedy, it is a tragedy because it has a sad ending. Unlike other tragedies which deal with the fall of kings and queens this tragedy deals with the bourgeois class of people, with middle class people. His plays are rebellion in nature, his play Brand (1865), it is a revolt against God. In Peer Gynt (1867), a young man rebels against society by choosing to live life of waste.
The aim of the present chapter is to study the women characters of his play *A Doll’s House*. *A Doll’s House* created an uproar upon its initial release. The play was first premiered at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. The issues which were raised are largely conventional of the prevailing conditions of women during that era. The effect of patriarchal ideology which is responsible for distorting social behaviour of the women character makes the play a naturalistic one. The roles of women included the role of mother, daughter and as a house maker only. Ibsen had started thinking about writing the play around May 1878. He argues that:

> A woman cannot be herself in modern society for it is an exclusive male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint. (Meyer 466)

It was believed that *A Doll’s House* was based on Laura Kieler a close friend of Ibsen. The incidents in the play are quite similar to Laura’s life. James McFarlane in *Companion to Ibsen* has remarked “Marriage was considered a holy sacrament and to portray it in such a way was completely unaccepted” (McFarlane 167). To many 19th century Europeans to criticize the traditional roles of men and women in the 19th century marriage was scandalous. However there was, “one person George Bernard Shaw who had championed Ibsen because he was not afraid of societal norms” (Griffith 164). Shapiro observes that, “in Germany the lead actress of the play had refused to play the role of Nora and had demanded Ibsen to change the ending of the play” (99).

When the play opens we see Nora back from her Christmas shopping and over-tipping the porter. Her husband (Torvald) asks her if she has been again overspending.
But he does not stop her from doing it. He addresses her as, “little skylark”, and “little squirrel”. Nora responds to these names in the same manner. Here Torvald leaves no doubt in her mind that he is the master of the house. Also he addresses her at all occasions in the same manner. This shows the superior attitude of Torvald towards Nora. He speaks with her in a higher manner and the tone we perceive is very patronizing.

Torvald: My pretty little pet is very sweet, but it runs away with awful lot of money. It’s incredible how expensive it is for a man to keep such a pet. (5)

We also find that he is a moralist, whenever he gets the opportunity to do so, he advices her to never borrow money. Here money plays an important role.

Torvald: Nora, you know what I think about that sort of thing.

No debts! Never borrow! (5)

_A Doll’s House_ contains many naturalistic elements reminiscent of Zola. The detailed description of the Helmer’s sitting room in the opening stage directions, with its carefully evoked ambience suggesting both the social class and the values of the occupants, is technically close to Balzac’s _The Human Comedy_. Setting, costumes and language are all close to everyday life. Nora is shown to be devoted wife and she is also convinced that her husband too is a devoted husband. Torvald regarded Nora as his property, and had possessive attitude towards her. He regarded her as a ‘helpless little thing’ that is unable to handle all the things herself. Torvald in the beginning had also compared Nora to her father. Though the comparison meant to be sarcastic but he had remarked it in a casual manner. It is known in the play that Nora’s father was a spendthrift and Torvald refers her shopping as a hereditary. Hereditary and environment are strong motifs in the play. Nora — she is her father’s
daughter, and her spendthrift ways, her playacting, her irresponsibility, and her amorality all run in her blood.

Torvald: What a funny little one you are! Just like your father – always on the look out for all the money you can get, but the moment you have it, it seems to slip through your fingers and you never know what becomes of it. Well, I must take you as you are – it’s in your blood. Oh yes, Nora, these things are hereditary! (7)

Nora too accepts the faults in her due to her father. This shows her submissive behaviour towards Torvald who acts more like a father to her than a husband.

Mrs. Linde another woman who is a close friend of Nora. Mrs. Linde is shown to be an unfortunate woman who is deprived of money. She tries to seek help from Nora. Widowed at a very young age Christine Linde comes with a hope to get a job at Torvald’s bank. Nora is moved at her friend’s plight and decides to help her as soon as possible. It’s later revealed that Mrs. Linde had married without the aspect of love only to help her mother and her brothers and she takes pride in her decision. The daughter of a poor family Christine was forced to sacrifice her young love. Christine Linde seems to be exact copy of self reliant and useful woman that Nora yearns to be. A critic Harold Clurman talks about Christine’s “fortitude, compassion and understanding” in renewing her relationship with Krogstad. However, there seems to be a personal motive over this large hearted generosity. “Mrs. Linde has suffered a great deal of uncertainties all her life, and her sole aim was to escape that condition, as she tells Nora. She is definitely more mature but not as courageous as Nora” (109). Mrs. Linde is a helpless victim of social environment.

Christine: What a difference – What a difference! Someone to
work for and live for. A home to look after. (67)

At this particular juncture it is revealed that Nora too had almost sacrificed her life for her husband. Nora has been a very controversial character with the critics from the very beginning. One of the critics known as George Brandes was not concerned to acknowledge any change in Nora for he had commented, “Nora is reborn a creature strong enough to bear the consequences of her choice”(170). One of the recent critics Inga Stina Ewbank believes that, “A Doll’s House is a play about anagnorisis or self knowledge ranking Nora with the other protagonists of Ibsen’s plays like Lona Hessel of The Pillars of Society (118). Further in the play it’s revealed that some years ago Torvald was taken ill and Nora’s father was not in a position to afford money for his treatment. Nora being a truly devoted wife had forged her father’s signature in order to gain money for Torvald’s treatment. In eagerness to serve her husband and in perfect innocence of the legal aspect Nora too, does not give the matter much thought. Moreover she regarded this as trivial matter because she had done this for the sake of her husband. Torvald was unknown of his wife’s borrowing. Now clearly examining Nora’s character we come to a realization that Nora in the beginning though treated as a child is not so immature as she is picturized. In her conversation with Mrs. Linde, Emma Goldman remarks, “Nora reveals her inner self and forecasts inevitable debacle that forecasts of her doll’s house” (31).

Nora: When Torvald gave me money for clothes and so on, I never used more than half of it; I always bought the simplest things. Torvald never noticed anything. But it was often very hard, Christina dear. For it’s so nice to be beautifully dressed. Isn’t it? (18)
Enters Krogstad, a lawyer employed at Torvald’s bank, things unfold and Nora comes to know that Krogstad is a man of shady character. Audience gets to know that Krogstad is the very same person from whom Nora had borrowed money. Things get complicated when Nora is bribed by Krogstad for retaining his job at the bank. Nora is threatened by him, her forgery would be exposed to Torvald. Nora on the contrary believes that Torvald though has abhorrence for borrowings and debts, will still stand by her as he is a devoted husband and rather take the blame on himself. To avoid Torvald taking the blame on his shoulders Nora plans to run away. She even considers the idea of committing suicide (though she admits she doesn’t have the courage to do the latter). She then begins to avoid her children believing that her influence upon them would corrupt them.

Nora: Corrupt my little children  poison my home?
That’s not true! It could never, never be true. (36)

Of Krogstad and his threats she is not afraid at all, what scares her is that her husband would sacrifice his life for her. Somehow it is Krogstad who makes her conscious of the of the offence she had committed. At the time of signing the bond on her father’s behalf, she had no knowledge that it would lead her into trouble. In fact, her forging her father’s signature was the most central act of her life, an act which determined the essential action of the play. Michael Meyer has expressed his astonishment that “a grown woman like Nora, however sheltered, could be so ignorant of the law” (104). This main act of forging her father’s signature lets her develop throughout the play, whereas Act one had initially set up the invasion of reality into Nora’s world and rattling the basic falseness of her life i.e. marriage and motherhood. The Act two eventually sees her set up a test that will determine whether the world is false or not. In other words she will confront the fact that Torvald will
find about her lie but believes that if he is the man she thinks he is, his discovery will only strengthen their marriage. Coming back to the naturalistic tendencies in the play, Mrs. Linde’s enforced rejection of Krogstad because of his lack of wealth so embitters him that he embezzles money, and later degenerates into a blackmailer, thereby permanently damaging his reputation and endangering his position at the bank. Money and the need to maintain social status commensurate with their class, also shape the lives of Nora and Torvald. Torvald’s refusal to borrow money even in a crisis, and the contemporary law that women could not take loans without the consent of a male relative, compel Nora to forge her father’s signature and lead ultimately to the collapse of her marriage.

Another character catches our attention is Dr. Rank. Though a minor character in the play he has a great influence on Nora and Torvald. He is a friend of the Helmers. Dr. Rank embodies and subverts the theatrical role of the male force that had been traditional in the plays of the time. Of all the characters in the play Nora is the most free with him. She feels she can behave with him as a grown woman and not as a child, as we see in their long encounter in Act two. This leads to her flirting with him to disguise her desperation. It also leads her to confide in him that she has never been able to express her true self either with her father or with Torvald. For his part, Dr. Rank intuitively divines that Nora is the emotionally stronger partner in their marriage even though Torvald is vested with patriarchal authority, and confides only to her the secret of his approaching death. Just as Nora is absolutely at ease with Rank, being unburdened by the strain of the playacting, and the baby talk that she has put on for Torvald, Rank, too, declares his love for her as a fascinating woman who is a person in her own right and not a ‘frisky squirrel.’ We learn that Dr. Rank has been secretly been in love with Nora and has been affected by his father’s corruption,
suffering from syphilis that he inherited from his father. Nora’s realization of Dr. Rank does not permit her to ask his help. Dr. Rank is genetically a victim of his father’s profligacy, suffering from syphilis. Dr. Rank ascribes Krogstad’s perverse nature to the factors heredity and environment and suggests that a society that nurtures Krogstad’s is diseased.

However Nora has been criticized by some critics like Evert Sprinchorn who spoke of three Nora’s, first the frisky squirrel, the second as the determined individualist and lastly he condemns as, “a person who apparently heartless flirt who toys with the feelings of the faithful Dr. Rank and teases him with her flesh-coloured stockings; then they go on to wonder whether so thoughtless a woman can ever undergo a moral transformation” (118)

Rank: Silk stockings.

Nora: Flesh coloured – aren’t they lovely?

the light’s bad in here now, but tomorrow . . .

no, no, no, you must only look at the feet.

Oh well, you may see the rest too

Rank: hm . . .

Nora: Why are you looking so critical?

Don’t you think they’ll fit? (49)

Rank’s disease and physical degeneration and decay served as a foil to Nora’s traumatized fantasies about suicide to escape Krogstad.

Coming back to the female characters in the play we tend to turn our attention to Mrs. Linde again. An old friend of Nora who comes to her for help. Deprived of childhood and happiness she represents the hollowness of the role of the wife and mother. Left destitute and unhappy by an unloving marriage she had spent her childhood making herself useful for
her family. Critics believe that Christina is in many ways a foil for Nora. Unlike the apparent Nora, the recipient of many indulgences in her father’s and her husband’s homes, Christina has struggled to survive. Her marriage was unsound and she had supported her family to survive. After becoming a widow it was discovered by her that his estate was not financially sound. Now her mother being dead and her brothers old enough to support themselves, Mrs. Linde had no means to support herself. Her unexpected engagement with Krogstad was based on no illusions at all, either about her own motive in getting herself a new home for the sake of security, or about Krogstad’s real nature. This is in contrast to the Helmers marriage which is marked by play acting and delusion. Other point to be noted is that Mrs. Linde seems to be self reliant and useful woman that Nora yearns to be. But appearances can be deceptive, her actions don’t seem to be the result of free choice. Apart from contributing to the play’s major concern with the woman’s lot, Mrs. Linde also has a functional role in the working out of the plot. Her sudden appearance after eight years, and her failure to realize that Nora has changed from the childish school girl she knew, leads Nora to reveal the details of her fateful trip to Italy that contributes to the exposition of the play and conveys the important information to the audience. Mrs. Linde’s role is more significant at the end of the play, when in the final act she wins over Krogstad with the proposal of marriage, she has the power to change his mind to save Nora from the humiliation she was about to confront. But she does not do so, as the audience or Krogstad would suspect that it would be only a ploy to save Nora, she confesses that she believes in integrity and leaves it to Helmers to discover the truth themselves. It may seem that some of her entrances in the play may seem to be fortuitous and some of her actions appear to be forced, as though designed for the purposes of the plot. She not only helps to further the plot, but also illustrates the helplessness even of
intelligent women in a patriarchal society dominated by the power of money. John Northam believes “that the minor characters in the play somewhat illustrate the predicament of Nora, Mrs. Linde fills the useful role of confidant to Nora. Her greater experience and steadiness throws Nora’s childish excitements into higher relief” (172).

Mrs. Linde and Nora demonstrate the position of women who are victims of patriarchal society. Although Mrs. Linde is sensible and reliable whereas Nora is volatile and immature, between them they illustrate the ways in which society marginalizes the woman – she can either be a butterfly or a drudge, but never a respected individual in her own right. Mrs. Linde accepts this situation by expediently renewing her relationship with Krogstad, while Nora questions it and challenges it.

There is another character in the play that tends to be forgotten by the audience and critics. Though appearing in the play for hardly five minutes this character seems to however help Nora when she seeks advice. Anne Marie is the nurse who had brought up Nora as a child too. Nora confirms to the nurse that she would not be spending time with her children any more as before. A close study of the play makes it clear that Ibsen has built up carefully the other side of Nora’s character than merely her frivolity, flirtatiousness and folly.

Nora: Do you think so? Do you think they’d forget their Mamma if she went away altogether?
Nurse: Went away altogether? But bless my soul . . . ?
Nora: Tell me Nanny . . . I’ve often wondered, how did you ever have the heart to hand over your child to strangers?
Nurse: But I had to, so that I could come and be Nanny to my little
Nora.

Nora: Yes, but how could you want to?

Nurse: When I had the chance of such a good place? Any poor girl who’d got into trouble would be glad to. And that blackguard of a man never did a thing for me. (38)

The play also studies the pernicious effects of money, class, and patriarchal ideology in distorting social behaviour and marginalizing the lower orders and women in general. Anne Marie, the nurse, has to abandon her illegitimate child and become a household help because of social strictures and poverty. Anne Marie had her own incomprehensible circumstances that made her leave her family. From the above lines we learn that her husband was not a good person and did not provide her proper means to bring up the family. Circumstances led her to leave her own daughter to strangers and carry on in her life. Her character is quite similar to Mrs. Linde who had to give up her youthful love for the sake of money and security. She has played the substitute Nora’s mother. It seems to be callous of her giving up her own daughter and serving as a mother to another girl. From the above lines an irony is represented, the nurse seems to be more sincere to Nora than her own daughter but the fact was that she has left her daughter for the sake of security and money. Here a negative image of the nurse is built, a selfish image of the nurse is conceived, i.e her working for her own life security and survival. John Northam here again illustrates a parallel between Nora and the old nurse Annie Marie. He believes that:

The brief discussion with the old nurse is therefore, on Nora’s part, a covert discussion of her own situation, and her sympathy for the old Nurse is to be transferred to herself. It is important to note that this brief scene emphasizes
the pain of leaving ones children – a point of some importance in the final interpretation of the play. (172)

Critics believe that Annie Marie is worse off than Mrs. Linde in being marginalized both by class and gender. She is a poor girl from the working class who got into trouble with an illegitimate pregnancy, was forced to give up the child for adoption and then fails to find a husband because of her sullied reputation, and has since then spent rest of her life as nursemaid, first to the motherless Nora and now to Nora’s children.

Moving back to the main characters of the play critics believe that Nora’s problem is that, despite sensing many unattractive facets in Torvald’s character, she idealizes her husband because that is what she has been socialized to do. Not being as independent as Mrs. Linde, she (Nora) for her own security, needs to believe in what she says to Dr. Rank:

Nora: You know how much how incredibly deeply
      Torvald loves me. He wouldn’t hesitate for a
      moment to give his life for me . . . (50)

She accepts Torvald’s fine declamation about shielding her from all troubles when Torvald really plays a hero. Nora always knows about Torvald’s pride and his desperate need for social approval. When Mrs. Linde asks whether she would consider confessing everything to her husband, she involuntarily exclaims:

Nora: Good heaven’s no, how could I? When he is so strict about that sort of thing . . . besides, Torvald has his pride most men have he’d be terribly hurt and humiliated if he thought he owed anything to me. It’d spoil everything between us, and our happy home would never be the same again. (17)
Nora’s confessions to Dr Rank look forward to the final exchange with Torvald in the last act:

    Nora: I’ve been your doll wife here, just as at home
    I was papa’s doll child. (82)

It shows, too there had always been a failure of communication between Nora and Torvald, as it was earlier with her father. There is an illuminating exchange in the episode just prior to the interlude with Dr. Rank, in which Nora makes a sharp innuendo about their relationship that Torvald completely fails to understand.

    Torvald: Now that wasn’t that a good idea of mine. (to suggest
    going to the fancy dress party in the Neapolitan costume)
    Nora: Splendid. But wasn’t it nice of me to do as you said?
    Torvald: (lifting her chin): Nice? To do what your husband says?
    all right, little scatterbrain, I know you didn’t mean
    it like that. (42)

Nora is indirectly saying that she has opinions of her own too, which Torvald ought to respect, but he is unable to take the hint since this would challenge his notions about male authority.

    Critics believed that Nora when facing other people except, Torvald showed her real self more. As it is evident in the beginning of the play, Nora avoided being seen eating macaroons at home because it was not allowed by Torvald, but she took it for granted in the presence of her friends. Besides, only Nora’s friends could know her true thought whether it was serious or not. She disclosed her anxiety about her marriage and the desire for money naturally in the presence of her friends.
It has been remarked that Nora’s vehemence while dancing the tarantella is a pointer to the suppressed passion and energy of her mind that comes out in full view when she confronts Torvald at the end of the play. The tarantella is a tribal dance, revealing the unrest of the victim who gets bitten by the poisonous spider. Its wild, unresting, movement is the tragedy of the character of Nora – light and frivolous on the surface, but concealing underneath a dread secret. It is the gruesome climax of Nora’s doll life, and it is placed where the chief symbol of Ibsen’s play is always placed, the climax of the play. It is the culmination of the plot.

*A Doll’s House* has been for a long time been appropriated as a work of feminist literature because of its portrayals of struggles of a woman caught in the grip of patriarchal society. The appropriation is rightly made on its apparent level. It revolves around precisely such a theme, a woman struggling to free herself from her husband and the society. Her subjection is clearly communicated through the words and gestures her husband uses for her. Clement Scott in *A Doll’s House: The Theatre* remarks, “Helmer’s name range from ‘little lark’, ‘little spendthrift’, ‘little prodigal’ He talks to her as if one talks to a doll saying” (20).

Torvald: You don’t have to tire your precious eyes and your fair little delicate hands. (8)

Lou Salome in *Ibsen’s Heroines* ties Nora’s objectification to the temporal and spatial setting – the action takes place at Christmas time, in the decorated house – by saying, “Christmas is a children’s festival, and Nora is a child” (155). M.C Bradbrook in *A Doll’s House: The Unweaving of the Web* even suggests that the name given to the main protagonist indicates trifled humanity. This play can be very well read as women’s rights, however Ibsen himself denied that the play is about the women’s rights explaining to the society for
"Extended Female Education in Vienna" about that, “the play was about the humanity instead” (82). However to understand the depths of Ibsen’s social critique we must study the non-woman characters in the play also: the men and the children. One of the main points of thematic focus in the play is the paternal failure. As far as we know in the paternal family the father figure is looked upon. However here in the play Torvald is quite alienated from his children. The single instance in the play wherein he comes in contact with his children reveals an explicit desire to remain utterly removed from them. As the children come into the house he remarks:

Torvald: Come along, Mrs. Linde, this place is unbearable now for anyone but mothers. (24)

Likewise here comes a contrast between Torvald and Anne Marie the Old Nurse. Anne Marie was forced to leave her children and work for Nora, is attributable in part to the absence of a provisionary father figure. She was poor and in trouble as she says:

Nurse: When I had the chance of such a good place? Any poor girl who’d got into trouble would be glad to. And that blackguard of a man never did a thing for me. (38)

Thus Ibsen portrays fatherhood in relation to the absence. In addition to the absence of the father, Ibsen assaults the patriarchy with the figure of the corrupt father who pollutes all those around him. Nora attributes Dr Rank’s poor health to the influence of his corrupt father. The father is corrupt, and therefore his influence on his children is thought to be one of the corruption, as well. Torvald too advances the fact that the corrupt father tend to corrupt their children. He proved the fact by giving the example of Krogstad.

Torvald: And certainly for years this fellow Krogstad has been
Salome explains regarding Krogstad that how “such a person creates a corrupt environment, and how he spins a web of lies in which his children must grow up” (155). However Torvald is also not above corruption. When the news of Nora’s forgery reaches him, he immediately determines to live a life of dishonesty himself, concealing the forgery just as he earlier condemned Krogstad for doing. Salome remarks that “Helmer is only a weakling whose only concern is with his reputation in the society” (155). Another naturalistic element i.e the influence of hereditary can be seen in Nora’s character. In her case father has a corrupting influence, as Torvald keeps on comparing her with her father, condemning both of them of being spendthrift.

Torvald: All your father’s flimsy values have come out in you. No religion, no morals, no sense of duty!
Oh, how I’m punished for letting him off
Exactly the way your father was. (77)

Paul Rosefeldt believes that, “The patriarchal society privileges the strong, benevolent father figure” (84). The portrayal of fatherhood in conjunction with coldness and even destruction borders on being a thematic focus of the play itself. In this sense Ibsen subverts the structural composition of a male based society. The most powerful aspects of the theme of patriarchal oppression are articulated in regard to Nora’s relation to the children. Nora here in many senses, can be seen as the heroine of the story as she defies the patriarchy and stands for the abolition of dehumanization and oppression. However, her relationship with her children could not be farther from this ideal. Rather she herself stands in a relationship of dehumanization towards her children. Instead of standing for her children’s liberation she
stands for her own. She places her power above them, calling them her ‘doll-children’ in the same way she objectified herself as a ‘doll-wife’. She refers to them as ‘little darlings’, treating them as her playthings as the objects of charms to amuse her. Salome remarks:

The transformation from her carefree days as a girl to marriage meant no more to her than a change from a small doll’s house to larger one; the main difference was that instead of her customary lifeless wax dolls, she would eventually receive three precious living dolls. (155)

The language she uses to refer them is quite literally ‘belittling’: capitalizing on their physical and social stature, she constantly refers to them as ‘little’. When children in the play recall her incident about their encounter with a ‘big’ dog, she says:

Nora: No, dogs never bite little children, lovely baby dollies. (25)

Her children however are not properly babies but the nomenclature she adopts in relation to them. Rather letting the nurse undress them, Nora takes upon herself to do the job.

Nora: I’ll undress them myself. Oh, yes let me. It’s such fun. (25)

Nora is quietly literally ‘playing dressing up’ with her children just as a person would do with their collection of toy dolls. Nora’s relationship with her children should not be viewed in isolation. In the first place the way she relates the children mirrors the way Torvald relates to the children. In fact the theme of doll making is not limited to Nora, rather her children are also subject to the paternalistic objectification of the story’s male figures. They too are treated as less than human by a structure of thought that privileges male adults. Torvald considers children to hold a subhuman position in the patriarchal hierarchy. Like he tells Nora:

Torvald: You talk like a child. You don’t know anything of the
world you live in. (84)

Implicit in this insult is the understanding that a child is inferior to other human beings; his likening her to a child denotes to a certain degree of degradation and lowering of status, at least for the duration of the insult. In the midst of a social stature that privileges particular forms of understanding and knowledge, Torvald views children as inferior. In the second place, Nora’s relation to her children mirrors both her father’s and Torvald’s relationship with her. Torvald treats and even views Nora as a child. In the final confrontation scene, Torvald explains what in his view, is excellent about his relationship with Nora saying:

Torvald: It’s as if she belongs to him in two ways now in

in a sense he’s given her fresh into the world again

and she’s become his wife and child as well. From

now on that’s what you’ll be to me – you bewildered,

helpless thing. (80)

Lou Salome in Ibsen’s Heroines here comments about Torvald who is, “the self satisfied and assured adult who has no one to look up to, deliberately chooses for his love-object a toy or doll for the idle hours between important business” (155). He chooses a ‘squirrel’ that can perform tricks when he is bored; a skylark that can sing away a sour mood. In the same way, Nora’s relation to her children closely resembles that of her father’s relation to her:

Nora: I’ve been your doll wife here, just at home I

was Papa’s doll child, and the children have

been my dolls in turn. I liked it when you

came and played with me, just as they liked
Nora’s father has treated her like a doll, her husband treats her like doll and now she treats her children in the same way. She enjoys dressing up her children just as Torvald enjoys having her. Nora’s treatment of the children is reflective of Torvald’s treatment of Nora the central patriarchal figure determines a certain relation to the people around him, and that relation is mirrored in the life of Nora. In the first case, Nora imitates her husband’s relation in general; in the second case, Nora treats her children in the same demeaning way as she was treated by the male primary figures in the play; her father and her husband. As we can see the power structure that defines the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed is hereby seen in the relationship between the oppressed and the others around her. Paulo Friere in the Pedagogy of the Oppressed observes that:

the oppressed, rather than fighting for her liberation, often subject those around them to a power structure similar to that to which they are themselves subjected they become oppressors themselves. This phenomenon derives from the fact that the oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of ‘adhesion’ to the oppressor . . . the one pole aspires not to liberation, but to identification with its opposite pole. (45)

David Thomas believes that this “adhesion” or “internalization” to those who have been in power over her are responsible for her behavior. He says:

Nora for her part has acquired her irresponsible attitudes and responses from her father’s treatment of her – she has internalized the relational structure in which she was situated in regards to her father. She lives in a society that has articulated the relationships between the individuals in terms of a binary
power structure: the oppressor and the oppressed, male and female, father and household, husband and wife. (177)

The theme of captivity has served as a performance guide for the portrayal of Ibsen’s characters. Elizabeth Hardwick observes that, “Ibsen had also led a life of bleak circumstances as he grew up in poverty as a result of his father’s bankruptcy. His mother had suffered many hardships as a result served as a model for his female characters” (33). Ibsen’s female characters are in a bondage to an object or person that manipulates the characters mental and emotional senses. The character’s inner captivity reaches a climax where a decision must be made to abolish the chains of captivity or forever remain enslaved. In Ibsen’s characters often the theme of captivity is observed through relationships. He has created a large number of father daughter relationships with the daughter as the replica of the father. The daughter is often kept captive to the memory, expectation or person of the father. Here an element of naturalism can be observed. Penny Farhan in *Reading, Writing, and Authority in Ibsen’s ‘Women’s Plays’* observes that, “the Ibsen’s character of Hedda in *Hedda Gabler* is deeply influenced by the memory of her father, General Gabbler. Nora also is influenced by a paternal relationship” (3). Nora feels transferred from the home of her father into marriage. As Nora exclaims to her husband

Nora: I mean, than I went from Papa’s hands into yours . . .

it’s a great sin what you and Papa did to me. (82)

The character of Hedvig in *The Wild Duck* is also a victim of an overly domineering father figure that defines the character’s captivity. Ibsen’s use of the strong father adds to the female character’s struggle with captivity. Ibsen’s daughters face a climactic choice of forsaking or dying to the captivities of their fathers. The theme of female captivity further
layers these characters, providing another element to the intricate and organic struggle. Hardwick has commented that the play *A Doll’s House* is about the power of money. Nora is enthralled by the power and freedom of money available to men. Ibsen gives further depth to Nora’s monetary conviction with the arrival of Nora’s old friend, Christine Linde. Nora immediately discusses the Helmer family successes despite an absence of ten years. Nora exclaims:

Nora: My husband been made manager in the bank
    just think ! From now on we can live quite
differently just as we want . . . won’t it be lovely
to have stacks of money and not a care in the world. (11)

Nora begins to surrender her will and identify to the comfort and freedom of money. Ibsen has carefully layered Nora’s jubilant monetary reactions to portray the illusion of a carefree woman. This illusion is broken by Nora’s revelation of the source of her monetary obsession, a secret loan of four thousand, eight hundred crowns to provide for a trip to Italy to save Torvald’s life. Nora feels very proud of the fact that she had saved her husband’s life despite her illegal act of borrowing money. The captivity of money provides Nora with a sense of freedom in the world of men. The effect of money and hereditary makes the play a naturalistic one. Nora finds clever ways of utilizing the household allowance from Torvald, as well as stealthily working on copying jobs. Nora does not view this plight as captivity to money and comments:

Nora: It was wonderful fun, sitting and working
    like that, earning money. It was like being
    a man. (18)
Nora is blind to her initial captivity to money, but slowly feels the pressure and tension of paying the loan back. Nora feels blind to the fact that Torvald would not be ready to help her out to pay the loan and Nora exclaims:

Nora: Now I’m free, oh how lovely to think of that Christine! Carefree! To know you’re carefree, utterly carefree… it is so marvelous to live and be happy! (19)

Nora’s apparent obsession with money is truly elated rejoicing at the near freedom from the captivity of the loan. Unfortunately, this freedom does not bloom to fruition as Nora sinks deeper into the monetary captivity.

Nora is a captive to the male society through the secret loan provided by Krogstad. The money lender Krogstad reveals that Nora had forged her father’s signature and committed a crime. Krogstad uses Nora’s forgery as blackmail, entrenching this female protagonist in a second layer of captivity to the rules set by the male society. Hardwick believes that Krogstad is in complete control of Nora’s fate. Nora begins to understand the consequences of the legal transgression and she tries her best to appease Krogstad by trying to convince Torvald to retain the money lender’s position at the bank.

Torvald, a member of the male society further encapsulates Nora in captivity to male society by enforcing his will. Nora is in danger of undergoing serious legal action that can affect her relationship with Torvald and her children. The captivity to the male society proves to be more difficult burden than monetary captivity. Annie M Reckdal in her article in *The Female Jouissance: An Analysis of Ibsen’s Et Dukkehjem* believes that, “Nora slowly recognizes and becomes conscious of her transgression of the law. Just as skylark is
her father’s and (Torvald) image of (Nora), so the image of her as a law breaker is also created by Torvald” (163). Torvald, a member of male society, sets a firm opinion against borrowing loans in the beginning of the play and makes a firm declaration against the moral attitude of a law breaker. Nora’s captivity expands into a secondary level of bondage to Torvald’s patronizing and moralistic attitude. Torvald’s patronizing and moralistic attitude was a trap for the character of Nora. Torvald keeps on tagging Nora with pet names, and view his wife as a child and a toy. Nora is constantly petted and treated like a child in the marriage to Torvald. Allphann Hoggatt observes that “Nora began as a doll child to her father and is then transferred to the role of doll wife to Helmer. Both men act as barriers to Nora’s growth as a responsible individual” (32). Helmer further cements Nora’s role as a doll-wife by often requiring performances of song and dance. Nora mentions to Mrs. Linde the viable danger of Torvald tiring of her appearance or habitual playacting. The theme of captivity is present in Helmer’s selfish and possessive treatment with Nora. Errol Durbach in *A Doll’s House: Ibsen’s Myth of Transformation* believes that, “Nora derives power from the only possible source that is sexual manipulation; she cannot directly communicate with Torvald about the loan as this would not be fitting for a doll-wife” (46). Nora is captive to the patronizing expectations of Torvald, as well as the moralistic expectations. Torvald’s moralistic tirade enslaves Nora in a life of confusion, doubt and self-loathing. Nora is captured by Torvald’s moralistic view and is terrified about her influence as a mother, she refuses to interact with her children. She states:

Nora: No, no, no don’t let them (the children) come near me! Keep them with you nanny. (86)
At the climax of the play Nora finally faces the consequences of her forgery and Torvald reacts abominably. Anne M Reckdal observes that, “Torvald starts blabbering villainous words towards Nora who was just like a ‘little skylark’ and ‘sweet possession’” (173). Torvald’s refusal to take the blame for his wife leads Nora to the climax of captivity where she decides to leave her, marriage, children and livelihood. Nora makes the decision to break out of the final chains of captivity and leave Torvald. A door slamming shut is heard below from the stage revealing Nora leaving her house. Allphin Hoggatt observes that Nora’s decision impacts her own development, “Nora has been a robot caring for her children physically, enjoying their daily romps and dances, really being a child with them. That fateful door slamming night she ceased being a child and assumed the maturity of an adult.”

In an essay *The Doll’s House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen* by Joan Templeton, “it is observed that for over a hundred years Nora has been under a direct siege. She is denounced as an irrational and ‘frivolous narcissist’, ‘an abnormal woman’, ‘a hysteric’, ‘a vain’, ‘unloving egoist’ who abandons her family in a paroxysm of selfishness” (28).

According to the feminist criticism, the roots of prejudice against women have long been embedded in the western culture and ideology. The gender discrimination advocates such myths that the male is by nature superior and the female is inferior; and the one rules and the other is ruled. These myths of gender and race distort the relations between men and women. 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. Because of the false assumption that males have more power than the females, gender roles are defined accordingly. Since this assumption has been a
traditional standard of ideology for society consciously or unconsciously, so much so that men find it hard to confront or accept any tendency of attack or sabotage to their absolute power. According to Bertens, literary works are pervaded with ideology. Ideology plays a crucial role in dealing with the gender problem, because, “ideology distorts reality in one way or another and falsely presents as natural and harmonious what is artificial and contradictory . . . if we succumb to the ideology we live in an illusory world, in what Marxism has often described as a state of false consciousness” (85). Nora is the best illustration of the woman who lives in a society where the male oppresses the female and reduces to a mere doll or plaything. Nora is that doll living in her fake doll house, which reinforces the fragile idea of a stable family living under a patriarchal and a traditional roof. One can argue that Nora and other female figures in the play like Mrs. Linde and Anne-Marie portrayed in A Doll’s House are the best models of the “second sex” or the “other” that the French revolutionary writer Simone de Beauvoir discussed in her essay, The Second Sex. De Beauvoir argues that throughout history, woman has been viewed as “hindrance or a prison” (12). Aristotle also said, “the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities. We should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness”. Woman is always depicted as secondary to man. She does not exist as an entity by herself but as the “other”.

Gender relation is discussed through the portrayal of struggle of ideological power between the men and the women. Ibsen’s A Doll’s House focuses on social and ideological aspects, through how women are perceived, especially in the context of social values and duties of both men and women as reflected through marriage. In A Doll’s House men are seemingly in the dominant position and they manipulate their power to control women in
ideological sphere so that their own identity and social status may be retained and be acknowledged by the society. As exposed in *A Doll’s House*, men are in a financially and ideologically superior position over women while women are kept in a subordinate position and are confined to their homes as they are not economically independent and have to rely on their husbands for support. What caused this situation was that in the 19th century Europe people held the notion that men were responsible for their families and provide all the necessities that a family needed, the women were supposed to maintain their sacred duty as a good wife and a mother. In the case of Torvald his ideology is conditioned by the social standards and his concepts of manliness. Torvald has a very clear but narrow definition of women roles. It is Torvald’s idea that women are inferior to men because women are less intelligent than men. He expects women to obey men and not argue with men’s decisions, not only outside homes but also inside homes because according to him it is men who set up rules for women to abide by. Helmer wants Nora to act the role of his beautiful and submissive ‘doll-wife’ whom he can control ideologically. It’s obvious that Torvald does not really know Nora or even really care to know her. All he cares is his manipulation of manly power that can bring him great psychological satisfaction.

According to Kauffman, “power is the key term referring to hegemonic masculinities. The common features of the dominant forms of contemporary masculinity is that manhood is equated with having some sort of power. In their relations with the females, Torvald manipulates his power over woman for control, playing the role of an oppressor to women” (81). Torvald’s maneuver to demonstrate his ideological power can be found in every possible circumstance. He desires power both at home and in society. In order to possess and retain this power, he abides by the rules in the society. He also sets up the rules at home for
his wife to follow. He wouldn’t allow his wife to break the rules, which to him is an insult and sabotage to his manliness and his authority. Nora also playacts to boost Torvald’s masculinity by playing the little girl to please him, and who also knows of her husbands desire of power, cannot conceal her excitement of her husband’s attainment of social power, which also she manipulates to her own advantage:

Nora: Well you can imagine how delightful we are.

He’s to start at the bank on the New Year’s Day

and we will have a big salary and lots of commission. (11)

Under Torvald’s masculine power Nora is deprived of her own identity and dignity and has to be comfortable to her husband’s ideology. She must keep secrets from Torvald, such as eating macaroons and borrowing money from Krogstad, as she knows clearly that Torvald wouldn’t bear to see his wife engaged in any deceitful actions, which to him are the source of all evils at home that would poison his children. He believes in the moral influential forces and he perceives that women are responsible for the purity of the world through their influence at home. Another place where Helmer places Nora in a secondary position is in the matters of financial aspects, it is illustrated when Nora states:

Nora: You might give me the money, Torvald. Only just as much you can afford; and then one of these days I’ll buy something with it. (6)

Hence, money is important symbol to represent Nora’s secondary position in the play and more generally the subservience of all women to the men. He treats Mrs. Linde in the same way, its an obvious fact that he does not care of Mrs. Linde’s well being. His arrangement of
the position in the bank is just a proof of his new found manpower in the society and ensures
him a sense of satisfaction as a man in the dominant position. When confronted with Nora’s
pleas to change his mind about Krogstad’s dismissal, he tells her that he would hate to appear
to have influenced by his wife:

   Helmer: So I’m to make a laughing stock of myself
          before the whole staff – with everybody saying
          that I can be swayed by all sorts of outside
          influences? (44)

Having a closer look, we can find that this refusal of Krogstad’s demand for restoration
to his job is a combination of demonstration of his power and fear of the threat to his
newfound political power as he knows clearly the disposition of Krogstad. In reply to
Nora’s pleading for Krogstad, Torvald discloses the true reason for wanting to get rid
of him.

   Thus the naturalistic element can be observed throughout the play. Ibsen while
portraying his women characters has shown them under strong influence of ideological
power, environment, money, hereditary.
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