

Tora: an emblem of new woman

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Ibsen was a powerful Norwegian playwright who left no stone unturned to explore all the critical problems of the society right from his *Pillars of the Society*, *Ghosts* to *The Enemy of People*. Ibsen was really disturbed to find that women were being turned into mere gewgaws of the household, to decorate the house, to nod at every odd proposal put forth by her husband, i.e., the master of the household, to dance to his tune all the time to keep the peace and harmony of home intact. He was such aggrieved to observe this unhealthy balance, that he composed the brilliant play *A Doll's House*, considered to be one of the best plays that marks a new epoch in the history of women's emancipation.

Ibsen himself wrote "The wife in the play ends by having no idea of what is right or wrong; natural feeling on the hand and belief in authority on the other have altogether bewildered her.

A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view." [Cf. Ibsen, Henrik: *Notes for the Modern Tragedy*]

Hence, Ibsen was very much aware of the fact that the housekeeping woman-cum-wife was invariably looked down upon by the male chauvinistic husband. Why not look at Nora Helmer and her position in the household from close quarters?

In the very first act, when she enters with a load of parcels in her hand and interacts with her husband Torvald, she is addressed at least more than once as "featherbrain", "scatterbrain" so forth. It may be so taken for

granted that Torvald driven by the unalloyed passion of love for her wife addresses her in like terms. So far as 'songbird', 'doll-wife' go that may have some significance. But, when Torvald unhesitatingly utters, "You wouldn't believe

how much it costs a man when he's got a little songbird like you", his dormant chauvinism suddenly pops up to the open. Does he not mean to belittle the labor his wife is incessantly putting in to run the household smoothly, that too, not in expectation of any material gain for herself in turn? Yes, he does, whether he intends to mean so or not.

In Act One itself, it becomes crystal clear to us that Nora loved her husband so deeply that she never hesitated to forge a document when it came to the decision of saving her husband's life. She even confessed of working as a copywriter for sometime working late into the night burning her midnight oil and energy. Why? TO SAVE HER HUSBAND'S PRECIOUS LIFE!! And what did she get in turn?

Nora's interaction with Mr. Krogstad too was not out of the necessities of profession. The letter that he left shoving her to the brink of destruction was rectified later on by another letter of contrition. But, the matters had turned worse by then. Our query to the playwright is, if Nora got the taste of earning like a man by copywriting why did she not continue with it and accrue some sort of self-complacency by seeing herself dependent? Perhaps, the subjugation of women in that era for which Mary Wollstonecraft

and others of that period fought was stifling her to death from within!

Knowingly, unknowingly, or whatever!!

Mr. Krogstad at one point started pestering Nora to influence her husband for retaining him as his subordinate in the bank. Thereafter, this sneaking man went to such a daring extent that Nora could not disown him, knowing full well that this man was more venomous than a viper. Mr. Krogstad started blackmailing Nora with such incriminating statements like,

“ Your father died on the twenty-ninth of September. But look at this –your father has dated his signature the second of October. Isn’t that a curious thing, Mrs. Helmer?”

[Nora is silent]

Can you explain it?”[A Doll’s House, Act One]

Nora was caught into the snare and lastly when the act of unintentional forgery stood exposed to Torvald in Act Three and he hit the roof , accusing his doll-wife with harsh words , Nora had every reason to give vent to her pent-up hurt feelings. She felt humiliated when Torvald pointed rude and naked finger to her dead father’s moral failings and detested her for inheriting so. Was it not the most heinous form of accusation? Torvald could demean her , could call her names even, but was it really ethical of him as a son-in-law to bring down the house at the expense of his dead father-in-law’s moral turpitude? That might be utterly baseless even!

Even after such humiliation Nora could utter , “ I’ve loved you more than anything in the world.” Torvald cast aspersions on her by calling her “ liar”, “ hypocrite” even worse, “ a criminal”. She had inherited her father’s shiftless character by proving herself irreligious, immoral, irresponsible! Nora went on listening all the odorous, obnoxious accusations maintaining her cool. And , even when Torvald thundered, “ And I’m brought so pitifully low all because of a shiftless woman!” she remained surprisingly calm rejoining only, “ Once I’m out of the way, you’ll be free.”

Torvald went a step further and snowballed his unguarded comment, You will remain here in my house ---that goes without saying—but I shall not allow you to bring up my children.... I shouldn’t dare trust you with them”, then could any motherly sentiment remain untouched ? Nora’s heart too bled profusely at such ruthless utterance. That was why, it took hardly a few seconds for her to decide to slam the door on her husband’s face at last!

When the letter of repentance or redress reached Torvald, he in the same peremptory tone spoke out, “ Nora, I’m saved.” Nora in a passive tone inquired of her position, “ And I?” With intense passion, Torvald said, “ You too of course.” After such mindless , pointless humiliation , how could Torvald be so inane to belt out the words, “ I’ve forgiven you..”?”

We are surprised to see Nora turning back to look stern at him , thus intimidating him. Nora pulled up all her courage to blurt out on his face, “ You’ve never loved me, you’ve only found it pleasant to be in love with me.” Therafter , Nora went on expatiating her restrained attitude in both her father’s house and later at her husband’s . She admitted of dancing to both

her father's and husband's tunes , as the cases might have been. Later on with much conviction the revelation dawned upon her, " You and Papa have committed a grievous sin against me: it's your fault that I've made nothing of my life."

She never had the courage to express her own opinion. Now she mustered her guts to speak out and think independently with her own grey cells!! Now she was not hesitant to say that she was never happy at Torvald's , but only " gay". Nora felt the need of educating herself, she was keen on standing on her own feet , if she was to know herself and the world outside. Her tongue did not falter to utter, " That's why I can't stay here with you any longer."

This daring statement could only suffice to bring a New Woman out of conventional Nora , a doll-wife , in the era when voicing a protest against a husband was simply next to impossible!! Nora lastly hit the bull's eye by saying that life could hardly be a real marriage for a couple who pretended all the time to be HAPPY!!

It was the greatest miracle of all when Nora left the house slamming the door behind. The house appeared EMPTY to Torvald.

We were being prepared throughout the play for this final action from Nora. Her unrequited love for her husband , for her family shoved her to the edge of utter denial . The children for whom she spent her last farthing to buy the costliest Christmas gift , too, could not be trusted with her!! Such utterance drove her desperate, insane and her decision seemed appropriate. However inane it might appear at the outset, it brought to the fore a revolutionary and protesting self of a woman who hated demeaning her womanhood.

As economic freedom happened to be a significant criterion of a free woman, will it be very wrong to say that Nora of Ibsen foreshadowed Lily Briscoe of Virginia Woolf or her thought of an earning woman as a New Woman as appeared in her *A Room of one's Own*? As in later days we find Michele Foucault arguing about self-refusal rather than self-discovery, by which he meant to say that 'to become what she was not at the beginning.'

Thus, the concept of New Woman which was taking shape with *Mother Courage* of Brecht or *Wife of Bath* of Chaucer even much earlier found a veritable shape in Nora Helmer. Nora was truly justified to rise up in arms against the abominable subjugation inflicted on her and Ibsen was assiduously preparing the audience right from Act One for such a finale.

Of course, Nora had every right to chime in with a contemporary woman-poet, Anna Laetitia Barbauld,

“ Yes, injured Woman! rise, assert thy right!

Woman! too long degraded, scorned, oppressed;

O born to rule in partial Law's despite,

Resume thy native empire o'er the breast.”[*The Rights of Woman*]

Works Cited

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