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Henry Ibsen's *A Doll's House*: A Modern Tragedy

Henrik Ibsen's plays can be viewed as a galaxy of various characters being trapped in societal realism. His characters may be classified into at two categories: unconventional and conventional .The unconventional heroines are based on powerful women personalities consisting of strong-willed, independent, intelligent and full of vitality. With their strong personalities, they are usually doomed to be trapped in a male – centered society where they are deprived of the basic right as human beings in its full sense. Ibsen has insightfully described a range of rebellious characters and unveiled the spiritual pilgrimage they have gone through in their persistent pursuit of emancipation, freedom and in their bitter struggle to regain their identity as human beings. It was Ibsen who gave woman a vigorous voice by creating a powerful woman character, Nora in *A Doll's House* with a view to breaking conventional custom and conservatism. He wanted to focus on how women were viewed to the male gaze of his contemporary age. According to many critics, *A Doll's House* is a manifesto of universal feminism. To achieve her power and freedom, Nora becomes homeless, voluntarily leaving her husband, children, and family. Through this character, Ibsen has created the female situation of the society in those times. Ibsen's female creation

also symbolizes a big difference between patriarchy and matriarchy of the 20th century and 21st century feminism as well.

Key Words: Unconventional, Freedom, Emancipation

Henrik Ibsen is known as the father of modern realism .Before Ibsen, all dramatists followed romantic convention. Ibsen for the first time introduced problem play. *A Doll's House* is a problem play or a thesis play like most of his other works. It presents the real problem of society to the audience and to the reader.

“He has written a modern play about a modern woman in a modern situation but he adds now stature and a new dimension to it by concentrating on different kinds of imagery to suggest that society works upon Nora like some dreadful, hidden and inexorable disease”

(Northam, John)

A Doll's House has been labeled as a propaganda piece for women's rights perhaps because the dramatist has dramatized the development of Nora, the chief protagonist of the play, to the awakening of her individuality and self assertion as a woman. The play is not thought to be a tragedy by the public, yet Ibsen refers to it as a Modern Tragedy. He suggest a tragic struggle that lies behind the trivial anxieties of a house wife unlike a struggle involving a heroic figure, in conflict with the secret, powerful and indictable forces of society .It may not be a tragedy in a traditional or Aristotelian sense but it comes under the category of Modern Tragedy which depicts the tragic struggle of the ordinary character against the social, political or economic forces. In this problem play , Ibsen has depicted the struggle of a bourgeois character , a wife, who lived as a doll wife with her husband , a doll mother with her children , finally takes a revolutionary step of deserting, not only her home and husband but also her children. This is the face of extreme uncertainty to discover her own individuality and potentiality. Once she is awake, there is no looking back for her and not any miracle can

provide her any help to revoke her decision. There lies the message, the appeal, and the strength of their anti romantic naturalistic and realistic play.

A Doll's House is a tragic play in which Nora leaves her home to the world of new possibilities. She wants to rediscover herself, wants to know her duties, not towards her family or society but towards herself. This kind of self-realization, which usually leads to a new beginning, is one of Ibsen's main ideologies presented in the play. Nora opens her eyes and observes that her individuality and freedom have been taken by her husband. .

The play has a sad ending, depicts the breakup of a family and the total collapse of domestic life of a couple, Nora and Torvald Helmer .Even the style of this tragedy is modern. Traditional tragedies were written in verse form but the present play is a tragedy in prose that has not only the lyrical excellence but also the force in the delivery of the dialogues. At that time when there was no talk of feminism or women's rights and the society was completely male dominated, governed by male whims and fancies, male consciousness, male moral code of conduct, Ibsen successfully and eloquently delivered his message. Though, the play was written long time ago, even today we can understand the relevance and force of the message.

John Northam says:

"Here is written a modern play about a modern woman in a modern situation but he adds the new stature and new dimension to it by concentrating different kinds of imagery to suggest that society work upon Nora like some dreadful, hidden and inexorable diseaseNora's consistent fight against that in which she will sacrifice no basic principles however desperate her situation makes her into a heroine. Ibsen has discovered his modern hero." [Northam, John]

Ibsen adds that the life of the play ends by having no idea about what is right and what is wrong. On one hand, it's a natural feeling of the authority, on the other hand which leads her to destruction. How ironical it is that the feminine conduct is to be judged from a

masculine standpoint by male judges. In the end of the play, Ibsen takes artistic pains to depict the catastrophe in despair, conflict and defeat. Decision taken by Nora is firm and irrevocable. Prior to this no play has even initiated so powerfully and authoritatively a social debate on the respect for rights, freedom and individuality of women. Appeal was so widespread that people stopped thinking of marriage as an automatic provider of absolute bliss. Divorce between the incompatible couples was accepted and justified.

The following lines have been taken from the end of the play which gives us the objective approach to understand the text of the play. It helps us to understand the play in the larger structure i.e. humanism.

“NORA: I have other duties just as sacred. Duties to myself.

TORVALD: Before all else you are a wife and mother.

NORA: I don't believe that any longer, I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being just as you are — or, at all events, which I must try and become one. I know quite well, Torvald that most people would think you right and that views of that kind are to be found in books; but I can no longer content myself with what most people say or with what is found in books. I must think over things for myself and get to understand them.”(Ibsen, Act 3)

There is no denying the fact that *A Doll's House* is a modern tragedy in the modern sense. Nora decides on a powerful renunciation, gains stature tortured by mental sufferings is a victory in her defeat where everything lies to ruin her. This modern tragic heroine symbolizes more independent and more honest humanity in a healthier society. Her departure into the strange unknown wind with complete uncertainty emphasized her ultimate tragic fate. *A Doll's House* introduced a turning point in a European Drama.

Through different activities and writings Ibsen was in favor of women's independence. A theme which was recurrent in those days, the play deals with a predicament in which a married woman finds herself on account of the excessive control which her

husband exercises upon her. The situation or the theme of the play was very appropriate for the 19th century Europe. A woman was reduced in size by her conventional society. In the present play, the husband is reduced in size and new lesson was taught to the society. She also defers him. The woman is dedicated to seek her rights, whereas the size of the duty to her family is reduced. The main aim of this play was to establish the fact that a woman should be allowed to establish her identity and develop her own individual existence.

A Doll's House has been for a long time 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. Ibsen believes that there is difference between the private and public life of an individual. He believes that an individual is a sustaining element in the society and his status in the family portrays his status in the society.

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