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Nora's Retaliation against Patriarchy in "A Doll's House" by Henrik Ibsen

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Abstract

The undertaken study aims to show the Nora's retaliation against patriarchy. She is the protagonist of the play "A Doll's house" by Henrik Ibsen. Under the prevailing norms and customs of patriarchy, she is treated like a doll and puppet by her husband, Torvald Helmer. She sacrifices her own wishes to fulfil her duties. She has stamina, courage, fortitude, perseverance and endurance, and tries her best to cope with the situation but at the end; she retaliates by showering punitive response to the perceived injustice. She unchains herself from the fetters of society and slavish life, and leaves Helmer in spite of his apology. The audience is stunned when Nora leaves everything and goes away. There are multiple explanations of her action but the present study is to portray a fact that it is nothing but her retaliation against patriarchy.

Keywords

Nora's retaliation, endurance, fortitude, perseverance, social barriers, patriarchy.

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Introduction and background to study

Patriarchy is a great impediment in the way of women progress. Since the beginning of time it has been a part and parcel of the women fate in various colors. Still in the Modern age the principle of subordination of women exists. (Lerner, 1989), argues "patriarchy is not one event but a process developing over a period of almost 2500 years (from approximately 3100 BC to 600 BC)". Women have been oppressed and ruled in the society in many ways i.e. a commodity, a sex object, a puppet and a prisoner in the four walls of the house. In the play "A doll's house" the code heroine, Nora, is also treated as a Doll who has been suppressed and deprived of her basic needs by her husband, Torvald Helmer. Nora is a very obedient wife who never opposes the ideas, likes and dislikes of her husband. On the other hand, Torvald is possessive and dominates the personality of Nora but she never makes distinction. At the end of the play, by breaking all the hard and fast norms and traditions of the society, she takes the initiative and marks her retaliation, leaving her husband and children, against social barriers and patriarchy, explores the ways of freedom not only for herself but also for all the women of the prevailing society and thereafter. This research paper comprises of three sections. The first section deals with the analysis of patriarchal clouds prevailing in the text on the character of Nora with the course of events. The second section throws light on the existence of women, especially Nora, under such restricted circumstances as depicted by Ibsen in the play. The third section exhibits Nora's retaliation and manly advancement after her arduous inclination towards her family

Literature review:

The play "*A Doll's House"* by Henrik Ibsen is patriarchal in its tone: "to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways" (Bhasin, 2006)

Different critics express their views about patriarchy in various ways. Mitchell, a feminist psychologist, uses the word patriarchy "to refer to kinship systems in which men exchange women" (Mitchell, 1971)

Walby defines "patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby, 1990). She explores as men and women are biologically different so they are assigned various roles.

Kate Millet's theory of subordination argues that women are a dependent sex class under patriarchal domination (Millett, 1977).

Subordination means, "Something else is less important than the other thing" (Cobuilld, 2010)

According to (Bertens, 1995: 99), feminism seeks to change the power relations between men and women that prevail under what is called patriarchy. It is clearly mentioned that women want to fight against this condition.

Patriarchy is a social system where men (fathers) master all the members of the family, all property, economic resources, and make all the important decisions. It has been observed that male characters are exploiting the females, and the character of Nora is the true depiction of that fact. She is the character that is mostly affected by the hands of her husband. In this regard,

the study argues the same assumption that the female characters are being exploited by the hands of males. However, this is not the aim of the study rather it is to explore that females are victims at the hands of males, and to show, at the end of the play, how does Nora Retaliates against patriarchal domination by slamming the door behind Torvald.

Research Methodology:

The present study is focused on the exhaustive analysis of the text of Drama "The Doll's House" by Henrik Ibsen in the light of feminist point of view. The study is oriented to answer the following research questions

1. What is Patriarchy, its origin and how does patriarchal system affect society as depicted in Ibsen's play a dolls house?
2. How do women tend to exist in patriarchal society in general and in the light of selected play in particular?
3. How does Nora as a representative of female sex retaliate against the patriarchal exploitation in the light of selected play?

Origin of Patriarchy:

The word Patriarchy means "the rule of the father" and comes from the Greek πατριάρχης (patriarkhēs), "father or chief of a race", it is a combination of πατριά (patria), "lineage, descent" (from πατήρ patēr, "father") and ἀρχή (arkhē), "domination, authority, sovereignty".

Patriarchy is such a system in which men exercise their superiority over women in all the society affairs. In such a society women are exploited and subjugated i.e. they have no rights to take decisions, to say right or wrong, or to hold the position of authority that may echo their superiority. Society is an amalgamation of different cultures devised by people for centuries. Mostly, Patriarchy is considered as an esteemed word among men, and scornful among women. This research shows that women have been suppressed and exploited more than the men. (Lerner D. , 1996), views the establishment of patriarchy as a historical process that developed from 3100 B.C. to 600 B.C. in the Near East. She believes, "Patriarchy arose partly from the practice of inter tribal exchanges of women for marriage in which women acquiesced because it was functional for the tribe.''

The origin of patriarchy was also presented by Frederick Engels in 1884 in his book, *The Origins of the Family*, *Private Property and the State* (Engels, 1940). Engels believed that private property became the bone of contention between men and women and from this greed woman's subordination started. The male members of society deprived women of property (their basic rights), and at that time the world historical defeat of the female sex took place. According to him both the division of classes and the subordination of women developed historically. As the concept of property emerged in the society, men gained control over property excluding the women class from division where men were only inclined to inherit property to their male heirs, even the mother was also excluded from the property. Women were controlled, domesticated, and restricted to the four walls of the house and with these actions patriarchy and monogamy for women emerged.

With the passage of time people generally got the idea that men are superior to women regarding all the spheres of life. Furthermore, she asserts the domination of powerful tribes over equalitarian societies lacking a warrior class; that women and children became the first prisoners and ultimately the first slaves in an era when male prisoners were killed.

Nora's existence and Patriarchal Elements with reference to the text of the play:

Nora is the protagonist of the play suffering from patriarchy norms and conditions. She is marginalized and treated like a doll in a house. She is limited even to decide and to like something for her. The following lines from the text of the play explore the same issue.

"Helmer. When did my squirrel come home?

Nora. Just now. (*Puts the bag of macaroons into her pocket and wipes her mouth*.) Come in here, Torvald, and see what I have bought.

Helmer. Don't disturb me. (*A little later, he opens the door and looks into the room, pen in hand*.) Bought, did you say?

All these things? Has my little spendthrift been wasting money again? **Nora.** Yes but, Torvald, this year we really can let ourselves go a little. This is the first Christmas that we have not needed to economise.

Helmer. Still, you know, we can't spend money recklessly.

Nora. Yes, Torvald, we may be a wee bit more reckless now, mayn't we? Just a tiny wee bit! You are going to have a big salary and earn lots and lots of money.

Helmer. Yes, after the New Year; but then it will be a whole quarter before the salary is due.

Nora. Pooh! we can borrow until then.

Helmer. Nora! (*Goes up to her and takes her playfully by the ear*.) The same little featherhead! Suppose, now, that I borrowed fifty pounds today, and you spent it all in the Christmas week, and then on New Year's Eve a slate fell on my head and killed me, and—

Nora (*putting her hands over his mouth*). Oh! don't say such horrid things. **Helmer**. That is like a woman! But seriously, Nora, you know what I think about that. No debt, no borrowing. There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt. We two have kept bravely on the straight road so far, and we will go on the same way for the short time longer that there need be any struggle (Ibsen, 1879) (Act I, p.4- 5)."

In the above lines, there is a discussion between Nora and her husband in which he applies patriarchal forces, mentions her by different names such as "Little Lark", "Little Squirrel", and "Little Miss Extravagant", questions her about her incoming and outgoing, addresses her as reckless spendthrift, forbids her from eating macaroons, restricts her wishes in celebrating the charismas event. There is no value of her suggestions even; Torvald denies borrowing money when Nora persuades her to do so. He treats her like a cute little girl and she handles the situation and digests each and every thing. Torvald confines Nora under some rules, as a father instructs a child, forbidding her from pursuing candy and other ordinary pleasures.

Mr. Torvald is a representative of such a Patriarchal system in which male is the primary authority and plays a central role in a social organization, and where fathers hold authority over women, children, and property. (Gamble, 2006), argues "In patriarchy women become all that is not men (or the image of unwanted male)" where men are considered as strong, rational and active while women are weak, emotional and passive.

At another point Mrs. Linde reminds her that she cannot even borrow the money.

> **"Mrs. Linde.** But where did you get it from, then?
>
> **Nora** (*humming and smiling with an air of mystery*). Hm, hm! Aha!
>
> **Mrs. Linde.** Because you couldn't have borrowed it.
>
> **Nora.** Couldn't I? Why not?
>
> **Mrs. Linde.** No, a wife cannot borrow without her husband's consent (Act I, p.14)."

In the above lines of the text Nora tells Mrs. Linde about the money, Two hundred and fifty pounds, that she produces herself. In fact, the doctor advises her husband, who is ill, to visit some distant cool area to improve his health, for this purpose Nora needs a lot of money to cure her husband then she decides to borrow the money for the sake of her husband without informing him. But Mrs. Linde tells her that she cannot even borrow money without the consent of her husband.

Another example of strong patriarchal power is mentioned in the following lines in which Mr. Torvald restrains Nora from eating macaroons. She has no freedom even to like something for herself. The following lines show her limitation.

> **"Helmer** (*wagging his finger at her*). Hasn't Miss Sweet Tooth been breaking rules in town today?
>
> **Nora.** No; what makes you think that?
>
> **Helmer**. Hasn't she paid a visit to the confectioner's?
>
> **Nora.** No, I assure you, Torvald—
>
> **Helmer**. Not been nibbling sweets?
>
> **Nora**. No, certainly not.
>
> **Helmer**. Not even taken a bite at a macaroon or two?
> **Nora**. No, Torvald, I assure you really— (Act I, p.7)."

Nora, who is completely suppressed, has no choice even to eat ordinary things. Mr. Torvald stops her, questions her and Nora assures her that she does not eat macaroons. She is totally in control of her husband and follows each and every direction issued by her husband. This shows prime authority of a male in a patriarchal house.

The powerful influence of patriarchy shows restriction of women to imply their wishes over men. Because of this suppression women become others and their rights are thrown away like them. Men's voice is regarded as authority and women's voice is ignored and not trusted.

Similarly, Nora is restricted, suppressed, kept limited to her husband's will, ignored and not trusted. The following lines indicate the same assumption.

"Helmer. That is like a woman! But seriously, Nora, you know what I think about that. No debt, no borrowing. There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt. We two have kept bravely on the straight road so far, and we will go on the same way for the short time longer that there need be any struggle.

Nora (*moving towards the stove*). As you please, Torvald." (Act I. p.5).

Nora's existence (suffering) in patriarchal society:

Most of the time in the play, Nora suffers for survival as a central female figure. She strives against prejudices and oppressions made on women due to the strong patriarchal power and poor feminine image. Her stamina includes helping her ill husband by borrowing money, decision for over work to pay the debt, to keep herself silent against her husband's orders, forging her father's signature for loan and saving money from her monthly expenses. She has stamina, fortitude and perseverance but at the end the situation becomes more intense. It happens when Krogstad delivers a letter to Torvald in which he informs Torvald about Nora's cheating of borrowing money and forging her father's signatures without her husband consent. Reading the letter, Mr. Torvald becomes furious, rebukes and blames her that she has spoiled his reputation by borrowing money from a person who is a villain. During this conversation and rage he completely ignores the loyalty of Nora and forgets whatever she did was just for the sake of him. This unawareness, carelessness and ignorance from her husband side arouse a sense of disappointment in Nora's heart and she decides to break all the relation with Torvald without considering anything, even her three children. The following dialogues illustrate the same idea.

> **"Nora**. I must stand quite alone, if I am to understand myself and everything about me. It is for that reason that I cannot remain with you any longer. **Helmer.** Nora, Nora!
>
> **Nora.** I am going away from here now, at once. I am sure Christine will take me in for the night—(Act. III, p. 76-77)."

At Nora's decision once again Mr. Torvald tries to put Patriarchal influence by uttering harsh words and forbidding her not to go but this time she retaliates and answers him "it is no use forbidding me now" as represented in the following lines

> **"Helmer.** You are out of your mind! I won't allow it! I forbid you!
>
> **Nora**. It is no use forbidding me anything any longer. I will take with me what belongs to myself. I will take nothing from you, either now or later. **Helmer.** What sort of madness is this!
>
> **Nora**. Tomorrow I shall go home— I mean, to my old home. It will be easiest for me to find something to do there (Act. III, p. 76-77)."

Mr. Torvald becomes stunned and responses in a very cold way, once again just to maintain patriarchal effect tried his best to suppress her but this time she has totally changed and has converted to a person determining never to submit or yield. On her strict action, leaving her

husband and three children, Torvald calls her as blind, fool and reminds her about society's norms, customs, traditions and sacred duty but she retaliates and answers, the most sacred duty is "Duties to myself".

> **"Helmer.** You blind, foolish woman!
>
> **Nora**. I must try and get some sense, Torvald.
>
> **Helmer.** To desert your home, your husband and your children! And you don't consider what people will say!
>
> **Nora.** I cannot consider that at all. I only know that it is necessary for me.
>
> **Helmer**. It's shocking. This is how you would neglect your most sacred duties.
>
> **Nora**. What do you consider my most sacred duties?
>
> **Helmer**. Do I need to tell you that? Are they not your duties to your husband and your children?
>
> **Nora**. I have other duties just as sacred.
>
> **Helmer**. That you have not. What duties could those be?
>
> **Nora**. Duties to myself (Act. III, p. 76-77)."

After analyzing Ibsen's "A Doll's House" based on feminist perspective focusing on Nora's retaliation against patriarchy, it can be concluded that Nora is a strong character with full vim and vigor. She fights for her independence, her own duties to herself. In the start of the play like a typical woman, she does her best to digest and suffer each and every patriarchal norm but after serving and sacrificing for her husband at all levels under patriarchal influences, she is still considered as a doll, a puppet and a commodity. Her husband for whom she does all this, instead of realizing her efforts, rebukes and blames her. Being disappointed by such patriarchal responses, she retaliates by showering punitive response to the perceived injustice. At the end, her retaliation reflects when she says "I am no wife for you", On insistence of Torvald, to wait till morning, she replies "I cannot spend the night in a strange man's room", even she denies to live with her husband as brother and sister. She does not wait to see her little ones, demands her ring back, put the keys, and forbids Torvald not to write or send anything. She takes initiative against these prevailing patriarchal norms and leaves her husband, and even does not care for her sacred duty.

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