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An Audible Slam and a Silent Slap: Symbolic Significance of the Banging of the Door in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

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Abstract: This paper analyses how the ending of Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* exemplifies the multifaceted impact of feminist literature as it critiques the gender politics that restrict women's emancipation. The protagonist Nora, portrayed as a human doll, gradually rebels against subjugation, culminating in a significant, albeit non-violent, closure marked by the iconic sound of a door slamming, as she leaves the house she was emotionally imprisoned in. This research examines how the play empowers women to reject unethical societal norms and assert their individuality, reflecting broader feminist issues prevalent during the Victorian era. Her departure defines her transition from a submissive figure to an independent individual. The symbolic nature of the door serves as a passage to autonomy, underscoring her psychological transformation. Ultimately, Ibsen's work resonates with the ongoing discourse on feminism, epitomising the struggle against a historically oppressive system, while urging women to reclaim their voices and agency.

Keywords: Door, Nora, Ibsen, Torvald, Ending

Introduction: The psychological, socio-political, and philosophical impact a drama aspires to convey is much determined by its denouement. Some endings leave the audience aghast, while some fetch bubbling excitement. The ending of Henrik Ibsen's play A Doll's House is one of the very few specimens in the history of English literature that manages to draw much of all kinds of emotions, reactions, and criticism out of readers. The gendered body politic of any structure assigns the woman to be the foundation and the men to be the erected structure itself. Name and fame are reserved for patriarchy, whereas the conventionally mandatory criteria of femininity include managing the household and birthing and rearing the children. Robinson Crusoe[1] and Lemuel Gulliver[2] are born to unravel to depths of the unknown, while the unnamed women lurk in the corners of the kitchen, feeding on heat and sweat to cook the "last supper"[3] of the Biblical sages. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* tells the tale of the puppet-wife Nora, who is fed, dressed and made to dance according to the whims of her lord and husband, Torvald Helmer, until the unannounced shifts between "playtime"(3, p.203) and "lesson-time"(3, p.203) snap the puppeteering strings attached to her mind, along with her silver lining of faith. With the doll's ascension to humanity, the craving for freedom drives her to break through the barriers that immemorially bribed her with a false sense of safety. The closure of the play is neither evidently violent nor nonchalant, yet metaphorically, it is both. Unexpected beyond imagination, the play doesn't end with any verbal complexity but simply with the sound of a door being slammed. This ending carries paramount significance as it unfolds that the protagonist Nora, who can resort to illegal measures to protect her family, can also slam the door on her deceiver, who dictatorially distorts her idea of a family, and land a pulsating slap in the face

of patriarchy.

In the nineteenth century, when guillotines were gradually being abolished as an inhuman means of execution, England discovered a new, invisible torture device as a morally ironic gift for women under the reign of the great Queen Victoria, namely the woman question[4]. Besides, the era was so obsessed with taxidermy[5] that it trapped women in a life in death existence, stuffing their psychological innards with socially constructed ideologies of everything: talking and walking, eating and mimicking, and most importantly, being obedient and lovely wives for men. While in Britain, there was at least minimal awareness of its existence, in Ibsen's distant Nordic country, these behavioural and existential shackles were even more normative and internalised by women themselves. The ending of *A Doll's House* is a blotch of defiance in the socially approved discourse on gendered hegemony. It imparts a counter-narrative against the Victorian conduct books[6], empowering women to reject patriarchal norms and assert agency and individuality. In fact, Laura Kieler, after whom Nora's character has been crafted, in reality wrote Norwegian novels and essays about the subjugation of women, providing an alternate discourse against the theories of male homogenisers. Although Nora didn't walk out on a world of roses, her unapologetic departure from emotional exploitation, despite being mentally stunted all her life, is tremendously empowering. Nora utilises the "door" to doubly contribute to her quest of violating the separate spheres theory[7], at first by constraint, and later, by desire. Just as Torvald, in Act I, closes the door to his study for professional privacy, Nora, too, secretively closes herself up before Christmas, working day and night to pay off the debt. She waits for eight years, balancing her tumultuous life on the hope that at her most dire moments, "the most miraculous thing"(3, p.220) will happen. Torvald, to save whom she forges her father's signature and risks her comforts, will protect her dignity, support her decisions, and appreciate her courage. However, instead of a miracle, Torvald prepares an emotional ordeal for her. The reason why Nora kept the debt a secret from Torvald was to protect his self-respect. But blinded by his male ego, ethical hypocrisy and tremendous misogyny towards his own wife, he launches blame upon blame on Nora. When the truth of the family she tied her life to gets exposed, she doesn't engage in any debates or negotiations, which she had done in the earlier Acts. When the miracle doesn't happen through the hands of Torvald, she doesn't hesitate to perform the miracle herself, shutting the door over his insolent protest: "I won't allow it! I forbid you! "(3, p.212). The "spendthrift"(1, p. 150) Nora who enters the stage with hands full of presents, apparently bought with Torvald's money, leaves the stage with nothing but a travelling bag, asserting boldly: " I don't take anything from strangers"(3, p.216), knowing well that the world will offer a married woman only two possibilities for monetary stability: being a prostitute or a governess. But Nora's obstinately independent claim to take away her "property"(3, p.216)[8] through the door that demands willing confinement from her, is a direct blow at the Napoleonic code[9]. Ultimately, the whole discourse of femininity that is constructed upon the idea of reputation becomes a paltry plaything for her the moment she ceases being a doll and prioritises her psyche, as she asserts: "but I can no longer contain myself with what most people say" (3, p.213). Nora's end is not exactly victorious, as the Nora that exists outside the slammed door is partially independent but not fully emancipated from the jaws of society. She stands with a newfound backbone, but her broken core cannot be invisibilised. Yet, for a woman who has been taught to normalise misogyny as

praise, instead of crumbling as a "greatly wronged"(3, p.210) damsel in distress, Nora exits as self-loving Amazon[10], announcing loud and clear: "I don't love you any more." (3, p.215)

In a world that moves slower than a glacial pace, the symbolic closure of the play is still relevant, as the more it is analytically interpreted, the more thematic elements it could signify. *A Doll's House* functions as a thespian bildungsroman where Nora's psychological maturation transforms her from a submissive wife with stifling certainty in life, to an independent lady with blissful uncertainty. Along with Nora, the contextual connotations of the doors also transform, intensifying with the rising action. The stage direction in the beginning portrays the door through which Nora leaves, to be "somewhat to the back"(1, p.143) of the centre stage. The entrance of Torvald's house, being at the back, structurally represents the idea of Nora's departure to be a distant dream even in his wildest imagination. The door becomes both the protector of her secrets and the cause of paranoia, as behind these closed doors, Nora does forbidden things in the house. In Act I, she secretively eats macaroons, which her husband doesn't allow quite unjustly: "NORA : [...shuts the door...Taking from her pocket a bag of macaroons, she eats one or two. Then, she goes on tip-toe to her husband's door and listens.]" (p.143). The very same entrance that she ecstatically unbars to see her children: "There they are! [She runs to the outer door and opens it. The Nurse, Anna, enters the hall with the children.] Come in! Come in! [Stoops down and kisses the children.] (1, p.162); in Act-II, brings malady of restlessness, fear of confrontation with Krogstad as she exclaims: "There's somebody coming! [Goes to the hall door and listens.] Nobody; "(p.175). Things brim to full when Helmer "[Locks the outer door]"(3, p.212), incriminating Nora to be a despicable culprit, "morally diseased"(3, p.212), the wrecker of his children and destroyer of his peace, reputation, and home. Finally, the ticking time bomb of endurance snaps inside her. Between the penultimate locking and the ultimate unbolting of the door, the death of the mother Nora, the "doll-wife"(3, p.213), the "pretty little songbird"(1, p.147) Nora takes place, and from the ashes of burnt hopes, rises the phoenix of a nameless, homeless yet "reasonable human being"(3, p.218), who is in search of an identity she must find herself. Standing in the doorway of her manipulated consciousness, where she made herself believe in an appeased future, she travels to her candid subconscious, where the truth of impending doom was vivid. The literal bashing of the door metaphorically represents her internal force of resistance and desertion of everything that made her life a frantic mess of agony- an everlasting Tarantella[11]. Torvald's authoritative accusation that she wants to sever her ties with him by abandoning him and the children can be logically subverted, as she, like any other scientific human being, needed to desaturate her life, dictated by the male catalysts that dissolved her original elements. The surprising ease with which she sacrifices even an atom of care for her children was possible because every molecule of her meticulously constructed, people-pleasing identity had been bombarded. To slam the door is to turn a deaf ear to the hammering anxiety that stung venom into her every moment. A lady in the midst of a feminist awakening must battle against the fascinating call of motherhood, the temptation of security that comes with sacrifices, and affections that are determined by appearances. It is an alternative form of revolt, as even if women's voices die under the chokehold of male dictatorship, the thudding impact of their actions may equally shatter the domineering agenda of phallocentrism and pave the path for the optimistic emergence of the new revolu-

tion of feminism.

It would not be an overstatement to assert that the crux of the whole play hinges on this banging closure. Different artistic representations have even improvised the end to sensationalise the emotion that the denouement of the play conveys. In 2012, BBC Radio 3 broadcast an adaptation by Tanika Gupta, transposing the setting to India in 1879, where Nora (renamed 'Niru') is a docile Indian woman married to Torvald (renamed 'Tom'), an Englishman working for the British Colonial Administration in Calcutta. Niru's confinement has been shown by the fact that she never surpasses the boundary of the home unless her husband takes her out in his car. By the end, Tom hears Niru thumping down the stairs, which in itself is an act of transgression from ideal womanliness; and slamming the door while hollering to an auto-rikshaw in a prominent voice he has never heard before. The Indian Nora not only walks out into liberty, but also pampers herself with a ride. Conversely, both Dariush Mehrjui's 1992 adaptation titled *Sara,* where Nora has been depicted as an Iranian refugee, and the 1944 German film *Nora*, directed by Harald Braun, which retells the story in line with Nazi ideology, defining the place of women, enact the alternate ending of the play. Ibsen, who under the pressure of German censorship laws was forced to alter the ending and had to write about Nora's apologetic reconciliation with Torvald, later himself criticised it to be a disgrace and barbaric outrage. The versatile victory of the play lies in the fact that both the original and alternate endings deliver a critically gendered didacticism to women about the firmness of their agency, clarifying what must be done at what cost, and what must not be done, no matter what it costs.

To conclude, Nora functions as a nineteenth-century fairy godmother, swallowing the hazardous reality and proving to a universal sisterhood that the vocal blockage in the larynx does dissipate under internal resistance and gives back the voice repeatedly taken away from them. The quality of being industrious, which is considered to be a masculine virtue, arises in Nora intrinsically as she weaponises the worst deficiency of her life to her advantage. Hedda Gabler, another awe-inspiring character written by Ibsen, says: “It's a liberation to know that an act of spontaneous courage is yet possible in this world. An act that has something of unconditional beauty.” (1, p.73). The fictional Nora Helmer doesn’t just close the door of toxicity; she whacks it, and its impactful reverberations continue to echo down into the “Me Too”[12] movement of today. The bitter chauvinism of patriarchy gets overpowered by the rejuvenating sweetness of freedom.

Endnotes

1. Robinson Crusoe is a character from Daniel Defoe’s novel of the same name. Crusoe’s unbelievable adventures make him the epitome of the love of adventure.
2. Lemuel Gulliver is a character from Jonathan Swift’s novel *Gulliver’s Travels*. His thirst for travelling is often used as the paradigm for the love of exploration.
3. The “last supper” refers to the final meal that Jesus shared with his apostles in Jerusalem before his crucifixion. Popular feminist debates point out how the sages are part of history, yet the women who cooked the supper are unknown.
4. The Victorian woman question refers to nineteenth-century social, legal, and intellectual debates surrounding women's roles, rights, and capabilities.
5. Taxidermy is the art of preserving the corpses of animals by filling their innards with materials and turning them into lifelike models for decoration or scientific study.
6. The Victorian conduct books attempted to assimilate women’s behavioural development in a scale of ideal femininity, which required a woman to meticulously follow

the codes of womanly conduct set by the patriarchal society.

7. The separate spheres theory was a nineteenth-century ideology that claimed that men belong to the public sphere and women should remain confined to the private sphere of the home.
8. Nora leaves with a travelling bag with things she brought from her father's house. Those are the only things she considers her "property" as she returns Torvald's wedding ring.
9. The Napoleonic Code was a French civil code of law which later spread to other parts of Europe as well. The law restricted women's financial emancipation, making them subordinate to their male relatives, especially the father, husband, brother and son. Women were not allowed to own property or do monetary transactions without the approval of their male guardians.
10. In Greek Mythology, the Amazons were a group of warrior women who lived by their own rules, disregarding patriarchal norms.
11. Tarantella is an Italian folk dance which aims to replicate the pain of a person bitten by a tarantula spider, through its fast tempo and frantic mood. Nora performed her Tarantella performance at a Christmas party the very night she finally left the house.
12. The "Me Too" movement is a twenty-first-century feminist movement against sexual abuse and domestic violence.

References

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