

Ibsen's *A Doll's House*: West centric views of women's rights, women's freedom, marriage, and family life versus Islamic values

Md. Hafijur Rahman¹

Abstract

Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House dramatises the family tragedy of Nora and Helmer, disseminating messages concerning women, the liberation of women, and their position in family and society. Bradbrook brands A Doll's House as a "Norwegian version of the great theme of later nineteenth-century literature throughout Europe, the sufferings of women in a masculine world..." The play also explores the home as a source of bigotry, hypocrisy, and blinkered vision. A Doll's House's deeper preoccupation is with a proper definition of freedom. Weigand (1970) describes Ibsen as "an ardent champion of women's rights and "an apostle of freedom and individualism." Shubedi (2002) opines that A Doll's House can safely be taken as a trope in intercultural studies today, especially in terms of the emulation of influences and search for the commonality of experience across cross-cultural spheres. The research attempts to make a contrastive and comparative analysis between the West-centric views of women's rights, freedom, marriage and family life as reflected in Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House and the Islamic views and values.

Key Words: *Women's Freedom, Marriage, Family life, West-centric views of women's rights, Islamic Values*

1. Introduction

A Doll's House, a three-act play by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, is significantly based on its critical attitude toward 19th-century marriage norms. Nora's entire life was constructed of social values and standards and the expectations of others. She spent life in a fantasy. Without realising the importance of her life, she prompted a large portion of the plot complications. Nora came to realise there were two forms of moral laws and two kinds of conscience (Mori 56).

A Doll's House centres round the story of Nora and her husband Helmer, who lived a conjugal life of eight years under the same roof with their three children. In Act III of the play, Nora suddenly discovers that her husband is indifferent to her needs and expectations and is interested only in saving his reputation, not Nora. Nora is disillusioned. Therefore, Nora decides to free herself from Helmer's grip. She rebels not just against Helmer but against the entire patriarchal society. Nora abandons her home, husband and even children. By revolting and abandoning her family, she emerges as a note of dissent from the part of women against male domination, oppression and exploitation. However, the themes and issues like women's sufferings, women's rights, their position, identity and suppression and oppression dealt with in *A Doll's House* are universal and timeless (Chilala: 2003). Now, the question is open to all: Is Ibsen the champion and apostle of women's rights and freedom? Should Nora break a marriage, abandoning her children in the name of female freedom? Is freedom first or family first? Besides, can the themes and issues of *A Doll's House* be studied as a cultural discourse? Or whether through *A Doll's House*, the West ventures to cultural aggression on the Orientals? May *A Doll's House* be interpreted from a gender and feminist perspective? Is Nora then a victim of existing socio-cultural and psycho-sexual politics, or is she a victim of penis envy? The biggest question is what Islam

¹Associate Professor, Department of English, Trust University Barishal, Bangladesh.

has to offer to ensure women's rights and freedom both in the family and social matrix. How does Islam deal with marriage, love, gender and freedom of women's issues? Does Ibsen really believe that breaking the marriage bond is the only solution to women's emancipation?

2. Objectives:

- To examine whether the Western idea of women's rights and freedom is in conformity with the principles and ethos of Islam
- To present how Islam has preserved and restored the rights of women
- To analyse whether the West is the champion of women's rights
- To show how *A Doll's House* has been being used as a discourse of cultural aggression
- To investigate whether Nora is the victim of existing socio-cultural and psycho-sexual politics or a victim of penis envy.

3. Research methodology

This study is qualitative research that mainly embarks on literary explorations. The theoretical framework chosen to analyse the selected play is based on critical essays, articles, and books on Ibsen's works, especially *A Doll's House*. The research will also attempt to explore and utilise different books, including the Holy Quran and the Hadith, as well as the best literature to authenticate Islamic values and views about women's freedom and rights. Besides, scholarly writings on women's freedom and rights (feminism) taken from different sources such as journals, the internet, academic materials retrieved from scholarly online databases and other available materials from reliable archives, libraries, and Edward Said's *Orientalism* will thoroughly be used to deal with cultural issues and views predominating in Islam, in the oriental and the western world. Moreover, any paper or book relevant to Ibsen's *A Doll's House: West-Centric Views of Women's Rights, Women's Freedom, Marriage, and Family Life Versus Islamic Values* will be fortified to validate the research. Comparison and contrast between the Doll's House concept (western concept) of Women's freedom and Islamic values will be the essential periphery for the research study.

4. Literature review

Islam championed many movements to improve the status of women at a time when societies were overtly traditional and underdeveloped. In Islam, women are considered equal to men in religious, social, and patriotic responsibilities but differ from the husband in family affairs. A woman cannot be forced into marriage by her family or guardians. She has to give her consent in the marriage. In marriage, she can keep her maiden name. She is entirely independent financially and can do with her money as she pleases. In inheritance, the daughter gets half of her brother's share, but under other circumstances, she gets as much as or even more than other men in the family. As a mother, she is placed ahead of her husband regarding earning children's loyalty, honour, and affection. She is given the privilege to speak up for her rights. Women thus had the right to speak up even to the Prophet (PBUH). On the other hand, the West's history is divided into two phases, with the first wave dating from 1830 to 1920, which is called the suffragette movement. The second wave was organised around women's liberation, dating from 1960 to the present. French philosopher and novelist Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* appeared in 1949, the interim between these two periods of feminist activity. She wrote in her book, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. She encapsulated an argument which propelled feminist thinking for the next fifty years or more. De Beauvoir constructed an epic account of gender division throughout history, examining biological, psychological, historical, and cultural explanations for the reduction of women to a

second or lesser sex. In the second wave, the fight for women's rights was articulated in powerful slogans such as 'Equal pay, equal work'. This type of liberal equality feminism is best associated with the pioneering American feminist Betty Friedan, whose book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) exposed the frustration and psychological distress of 1950s homemakers in America. Friedan's equality feminism was incredibly popular in liberal America. Friedan and her followers argued that mere legal equality could not redress the ancient imbalance between men and women. She further argued that the culture of male supremacy is so deeply rooted that women would be ill-equipped to grasp the opportunities for their advancement, even if they should suddenly become available. In Europe, feminism was more closely tied to a socialist tradition. Feminists influenced by Marx's trans-cultural and trans-historical theory of class equality sought a similar inclusive explanation for the disease of female oppression.

5. Literary and social history of the movement for women's freedom (feminism) in the West

Ibsen wrote *A Doll's House* in 1879. He is neither a feminist nor supports the feminist. However, his immortal creation, Nora, seems to be much ahead of her time. She seeks the recognition of women's individual identity, agency, and freedom in family life, as well as a share of power within the family and social structure (Raymond 26). She seems to be affected by the third wave of the feminist movement, which took place during the last decade of the last century in the 1990s. Feminism is a movement that fights for equality between men and women. Different waves of feminism have focused on different issues. The first wave of feminism focused on women's voting rights, whereas the second feminist movement focused on the diversity of women's liberation and sexual freedom. The last and third wave focused on diversity and intersectionality of identity. Third-wave feminism movement challenged heteronormative gender roles. It also emphasised the right to own property. Feminist movements have also sought to break away from patriarchal models of power structures.

The emergence of the New Woman in late nineteenth-century Britain was not an isolated phenomenon. Various social, educational and political reforms were responsible for her appearance. This chapter explores these factors and the impact of the new literary model of heroine introduced by Ibsen. Women's crusade for self-liberation was initiated by Lona Hessel's symbolic declaration at the end of Act I of *Pillars of Society* (1877); 'I want to let in some fresh air, my dear Pastor and culminates in the triumph of the transformed flower girl Eliza over her megalomaniac mentor Prof. Higgins who is forced to acknowledge in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, 'Five minutes ago you were like a milestone round my neck. Now, you are a tower of strength: a consort battleship. The improvement of women's status became all the more obvious comparison is made between Eliza's victory with that of Catherine's humiliating submission in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. She dislikes to be treated as a puppet by her husband.

Nora's decision to abandon her husband is born out of trauma, psychological dehydration and dryness of love. This realisation prompts Nora to leave. She wants to lead the life of a manly woman, be a part of a decision-making body and contribute meaningfully to family welfare activities and household chores (Dugun 85-94). She desires to find her position in the family as vibrant and lively with as much potentiality and benevolence, if not more (Eva 81-85). She felt betrayed by her husband Helmer, a friend, and Krogstad. She found the masculine world insensitive to women's feelings, emotions, actions and activities (Azmi 13-17). They are wholly driven by selfishness; they are business and career-minded. She discovered herself to be exploited by the menfolk as well as by her bosom friend socially, physically and emotionally. The Tarantella

dance and its consequence discern an implication that wives are meant to satisfy their husband's carnal desires (Bilal 123-132). She does not want to carry the passive image of women of the Victorian age, as found in Jane Austin's *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

Nora found the social and moral law of her time controversial. One is for men, and the other is for women. Nora's decision to leave her family was prompted not only by her disillusionment with Helmer. Social, family norms and moral and criminal laws of Norwegian society are also responsible for that (Ortin 131-141). The same moral law acquits Krogstad, who punishes Nora only for being a woman. Women had no right to open a bank account without their husbands' permission. Nora could have stayed happily as a good wife with her children and husband, but that would have been the graveyard of her identity and freedom. Nora's abandonment of her family is symbolic. It was not a question of freedom only. Nora revolted only when it appeared impossible to uphold her entity distinctively and flourish her identity freely (Young 211). It was actually a question of existence, identity and agency. When she felt her agency and identity threatened, she decided to quit. Nora dislikes playing the role of a little "skylark and squirrel" as she is always treated by her husband Helmer and her father. A sort of transformation has taken place in her. She likes to recognise her individual identity. She likes to fill up the position of his father and once again wants to play an active role in society as well as in the family structure, as a man can do. She wants to ensure equal rights for women within the family and in the more fantastic world. She does not want to be a pawn serving the family's needs and her husband only. She is reluctant to accept the passive role of women of Victorian women in the family and society, serving the family, remaining in the four walls, and being satisfied (Eslamie 96-104). The third phase of the feminist movement emphasises individual freedom and personal experiences of women over a singular focus on family life (Fenni 89-105). It addresses diverse issues, including financial, social, and cultural inequalities. It recognises the complexity of women's identities and their choices in various aspects of life, including but not limited to family. The third wave of feminism focuses on diversity and intersectionality of identity rather than individual freedom or family life.

6. Exploring multiple meanings of house, family, gender, doll and women's freedom in *A Doll's House*

A Doll's House offers multiple meanings of house, family, gender role, and women's freedom. Nora, as a wife, longed for a house that would be based entirely on love, compassion, fellow feelings, mutual respect and understanding, and equal sharing. Therefore, in the beginning, Nora fails to realise that she has a self of her own. As a woman, she had no choice and tastes of her own. Helmer always treated her like a puppet. The sole purpose of her life was to please her husband, Helmer. However, in the end, she discovered that her 'most sacred duty' was to herself. Finally, when she realised that in this male-dominated society, she had nothing to gain, she decided to liberate herself by denouncing her husband and children and abandoning her house. Obedient Nora, after being humiliated by her husband, transformed into a rebel. In the end, Nora is not at all a doll wife under the grip of her husband. She unlocked herself from the chain called marriage and the prison called family. Nora symbolises not only a woman's quest for freedom but also the quest to free one's soul. From individual, Nora raises her position to universal. Through Nora, Ibsen portrays the universal position of women and their life-long search for independence. Here, in the case of Nora, we find that there is a lack of Understanding between Helmer and Nora. Nora felt helpless when Helmer disowned her when she needed Helmer's support the most. Nora left no stone unturned to save Helmer's life by taking him to Italy. She borrowed money and worked day and night to pay the loan back. Her fault was that she did everything without informing Helmer

and by forging his father's signature. It is a moral breach. It is not a crime. Of course, Helmer finally forgave Nora. However, it was too late. Nora came to realise that as long as she lived in that house, she would have to lead a subjugated life that she did not desire. Therefore, she decided to quit. In case of divorce, Islam imposes some restrictions. Islam encourages family life with love, compassion, compromise and mutual understanding. Islam discourages divorce and permits it as an option but only as a last resort.

7. Ibsen's works and his ideas of freedom and equality of women versus Islamic values

Throughout his career, Henrick Ibsen's main concern was to show an individual's need to be true to his/her inner self. In *A Doll's House*, he conveys his views about individuality and the pursuit of social freedom. The central character, Nora, strives to metamorphose herself from a nonentity and to enlist her name in the register of the human race. In *A Doll's House*, Nora shows that if a woman wants to advance to a new life, tearing the shackles of enslavement off only to discover herself, indeed, she can do that. If she cannot discover herself, her life will be pointless. She drags down her life to a fetid trashcan, adhering to the social lies and false beliefs that she cannot breathe healthily. One day, she will die bearing the disgrace of enslavement as the world is so vast. Nora fancies finding out so many ways for herself to live with self-respect independently. She has willpower, and she can find it out easily. She can seek the power over herself, kindling the light of her soul. Though Ibsen has been acknowledged as the father of modern drama, his most significant contribution lies in his induction of the New Woman into modern drama. The assertive heroines of *Pillars of Society*, *Ghosts*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Rosmersholm* and *The Master Builder* are concerned with the portrayal of the ordeals of womanhood and her position in society. The need for individual freedom is the central theme of these plays.

In Islam, men and women are equal. The Quran says, "O mankind. We created you from a male and female and made you into nations and tribes so that you know one another." (Surah Al-Hujurat 49:13). Moreover, in the Prophet's Hadith, it is stated that "Men and women are equal halves." This is authenticated by Ahmad and Abu Dawoud (Omran, Abdel Rahim)

Islam has also guaranteed women the right to participate in religious and worldly affairs as well as the right to work and be involved in trade and commerce. Historical records show that in the early days, reflecting the faithful Islam, women appeared at public functions, studied and taught in learning classes and schools, traded in markets, sat on consultative counsels, and, as already mentioned, participated in the battle, mostly in supporting roles but sometimes as first-line fighters. Islam permits a woman to exercise complete freedom of her life and career by placing the husband as the head and the bread earner of the family.

8. West-centric views of gender as reflected in *A Doll's House* versus Islamic concept of gender

Preference for sons seems to have always been a pan-cultural and international trait. In the pre-Islamic period, it was essential to have sons who were expected to defend their tribe, earn a living and support the dependants of the tribe. Islam disallowed preferential treatment and urged equity between males and females from their first day of life. According to the Quranic provision, both genders are recipients of the divine breath and are created from the same human species. Both genders are dignified and trustees of Allah on earth (17:70). According to the Holy Quran, men and women have the same religious and moral duties and responsibilities. According to Hadith, parents are duty-bound to support and show kindness and justice to their daughters. Education is

not only equal rights but also equal responsibilities. Marriage in Islam is based on mutual peace, love and compassion between both genders. Islam does not discriminate between sons and daughters.

9. West-centric views of marriage as reflected in *A Doll's House* versus the Islamic concept of marriage

In her conjugal life, Nora always tries to please her husband, following conventional rules. She devoted herself to performing her duties towards her children, as she felt it to be her ultimate fate. She has always subordinated her opinions and identity to those of her father and husband. After getting married, she gradually starts to forget the meaning of individuality. She pretends to be submissive for the sake of the family. However, Helmer always treats her as his inferior and enjoys the eternal right to rebuke her. Helmer controls the monetary affairs of the family; Nora is dependent on him financially and socially. Still Nora submits herself to the likes and dislikes of Helmer. Helmer treats Nora as a property piece. Nora becomes a doll whom her husband fully controls.

When Helmer told her that he could risk everything (body and soul) for Nora's sake, Nora believed him without proof. But when Helmer discovered that Nora forged her father's signature on the loan bond, he disposed of his wife. He nullified their marriage, prioritising his reputation and social life rather than his family. He ignored Nora's contribution to nursing him back to health. Helmer's selfish attitude and the heartbreaking revelation that he cannot sacrifice his honour even for the person he loves finally prompt Nora to leave her house. Her realisation of living in a doll's house is complete. Though the kernel of family life is sharing, Nora could not share her secret with Helmer. In married life, a woman esteems feelings and personal relationships as of superior importance, while a man evaluates laws and legal rights highly. Disillusioned, Nora liberates herself from the family bondage. Nora questions family and social and religious institutions and shuns the accepted norms. Shaking off inertia, she awakens from a cat nap and deliberately decides to find a way to express her personality. Helmer, as a husband, should have sided with her wife when she was badly in need of his help and mental and psychological support. Islam reluctantly approves of breaking family ties because of the psychological and physical trauma the family members are to face consequently.

The Quran sanctions marriage as a meritorious institution and invests it with importance and dignity. Marriage in Islam is not a sacramental, indissoluble union of man and woman, but a contract—concluded between man and woman—it is one of the signs of God and is meritorious. For example, in Surah 30, verse 21, we read:

“And of His signs is this: He created for you helpmates from yourselves that you might find rest in them, and He ordained between you love and mercy.”

Men and women are important as well as comforting to one another. In Surah 1 Bakarah (The Cow) verse 187, we read: “..... they (wives) are raiment for you and you are raiment for them..”

In Islam, family and marriage are the basic units of social and educational institutes where people learn to live in peace and harmony through sacrifice and mutual understanding. Extramarital affairs and life without family or marriage are forbidden in Islam. "Our Home has

been nothing but a playroom. I have your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa's doll-child" (Ibsen 64).

The Quran clearly indicates that marriage is a sharing between two humans -men and women. Its purposes are perpetuating human life, emotional well-being, and spiritual harmony (Halepota 223). It is based on compromise, love and mercy. Islam considers marriage to be a serious commitment. It has prescribed specific measures to make the marital bond as permanent as possible. Again, Islam regards marriage as the most sacred institution and makes it incumbent on every Muslim man and woman. In the Holy Quran, it is stated, "And His signs is this that he created mates you from yourselves so that you will find rest and peace in mind in you, and He ordained between you love and mercy. So here, indeed, are signs for people who reflect. (Quran part30/ 21). "

Women's leadership is a slightly controversial issue in Islam. Those who oppose women's leadership place the following arguments: "And women shall have the rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable, but men have a degree over them (Quran 2:228)". The verse reveals that for better management of family life, Allah has given men a degree of superiority over women, and therefore, man is superior to women and so she cannot rule over him (Mostafa 225-236). In another verse, the Holy Quran clarifies the position of men and women. Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah has given the one more strength than the other and because they support them from their means (Quran 4:34). Quran also says, "The believer men and women are protectors of one another; they enjoy what is just and forbid what is evil (Quran 9:71)." In another place, Quran says, "Men shall have the benefit of which they earn and women shall have the benefit of which they earn (Quran 4:32)." The above verses treat women equally in every sphere of their life. But Islam emphasises family life, compromise, mercy and forgiveness. In Islam, a woman is entitled to express her opinions as that of a man. Her sound opinions are considered and not disregarded just because she is female. It is reported in the Quran, and history reveals that women not only expressed their opinions freely but also participated in serious discussions with the Prophet himself and other Muslim leaders (Quran 58:1-4, 60:10-12). Their valuable discussion and opinions have been accepted. There were occasions when Muslim women expressed their opinions on legislative matters of public interest. Sometimes, these views went sharply in opposition to the Caliphs, yet they accepted those women's sound arguments. An outstanding example may be cited in this regard once Prophet Muhammad (SM) was forced to perform Hajj (Pilgrimage) without entering Makkah. According to a treaty with the then leaders of Makkah and the leaders of the Jews, he had to perform pilgrim in the field of Hudaibiah. He ordered his companions to shave their heads and slaughter the animals to complete the rituals, but nobody followed his order. They felt brokenhearted at the order of the Prophet (SM) and ignored his verbal order. Feeling helpless, Prophet (SM) went back to his room. Prophet's (SM) wife, Umme Salma, came to know about the reason for his frustration and advised him to shave his head and slaughter his animal first. Accordingly, the Prophet (SM) did so, and all his companions followed him. Thus, the Prophet (SM) himself honoured women's views (Hossain 344).

10. Is *A Doll's House* a cultural discourse designed for cultural aggression?

At regular intervals, Ibsen's plays are staged either by the natives or having been patronised by the Dutchmen (ambassadors or literary persons) in all countries and continents across the world. Occasionally, seminars, symposia, and workshops, which have been patronised by the Netherlands, are organised in a planned way throughout the world. Thus, the Dutch are ferrying

and marketing their icons and products. Ibsen is their literary icon, and *A Doll's House* is a Dutch product they have successfully marketed and sold worldwide. The English came to us with their Shakespeare, while the Dutch came with Ibsen and Ibsenian products. We welcomed Shakespeare, the literary tycoon, and now the result is clear that by accepting Shakespeare, we not only accepted English imperialism but also allowed the imperialism to linger heavily on us. The English used Shakespeare as a vehicle to colonise us perpetually. Today, these are obvious from many postcolonial scholarly studies and also from Macaulay's statement about the purpose of introducing the English education system in India during the colonial regime, "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste and in opinions, in morals and in intellect."

The capitalist-materialist West wants its icons to remain fresh in our minds. By doing so, it wants to infuse us with the idea that we are inferior and that they are superior culturally, politically, ideologically, and technologically. It yearns to prove itself as a champion of human rights and women's freedom. It has taken it as a war of cultural domination on the Orientals. Indeed, the Dutch seem to be at the height of success in winning the battle of cultural imperialism.

11. Recommendations

In the Agrarian Age and the Stone Age, men went hunting and fishing, and women stayed home to care for their children. Men played dominating roles over women. It was not considered injustice to women because the social norms, rules and regulations were not for empowering women. They enjoyed a free existence. However, now, time has changed. Options are there in this new world. Now, women also want to identify themselves as capable beings. They want to study technical subjects and be doctors, engineers, teachers, etc. A wife can also work like her husband and contribute to the family and society. In the question of raising children and taking care of houses, a small quantity of adjustment, mutual understanding, self-respect, and a more compromising and sacrificing attitude with the existing system from both sides should be required. Islam is not against women's liberation and embarking on their enterprises. The solution to the note of dissent, revolt, and family break-up lies in being a bit liberal and generous in exploring each other's time and potential and in fostering and enjoying a happy conjugal and family life. A happy family and conjugal life with kids and even with senior citizens can be ensured only by following Islamic principles and looking forward to getting a reward from the Almighty Allah if any side feels deprived of fulfilling their desires, expectations, and dreams in family life. Only then 100% of the freedom of women, even remaining tied to the knot of family life until death takes away to the other world, can be ensured.

12. Conclusion

It is needless to mention the importance of women leadership for the development of women and reducing their sufferings. There is nothing unalloyed in this world, and so in the case of women's lives in a family, education, awareness building, teaching moral and Islamic values, and expressing women's identity courageously and with self-respect may reduce the sufferings of women with the family periphery. If not perceived and studied deeply, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* may send the wrong message to radical feminists. It may encourage many women to abolish and destroy the boundaries of family life. Abandoning family and children probably will not solve the problem, and it may be, in many cases, suicidal. Those who are not a slave in the family may entrap themselves as a slave to society. The solution may come out simply. Susan Bornmiller points out that a balanced division of time and duties may be there for the family, household and office and social responsibility by both the husband and wife. Sympathy, not apathy to errors and reluctant sins, and

looking forward to being forgiven by Allah may give a possible solution to the problem of women's sufferings, their image crisis and liberty. Failure to the following of Islamic code of life and Islamic principles in family life will give birth to many more Noras in our society, causing embarrassment to husbands and disturbance to the decent life of children. However, courageous and conscious women like Nora will always be a source of inspiration for women in any society down to the ages.

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