

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Female bildungsroman: An Analysis of Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House through the Lens of Luce Irigaray

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to uncover how Nora, the main character of Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House, matures and later challenges the patriarchal norms of her society. Victorian women typically were regarded as individuals whose sole responsibility was keeping a successful household and were bound to exist within the isolated world of home; once out of this world, they enter the realm of men where they are treated as inferiors. Naturally, women had adapted these characteristics; Nora is a typical Victorian woman except that at some point of her life, she refuses to stay passive, looks within, redefines femininity for herself, and once she perceives her potential, rebels against all the normalized perceptions that overlook women's free will. Focusing on her essence, she can finally express herself for the first time, which leads to her self-discovery journey in a path that is less tainted by patriarchal norms. The present study leaning toward Luce Irigaray's theory – i.e., a woman is deprived of independent social existence and subjectivity, she is considered merely a mother who associates with object and nature, whereas man is associated with culture and subjectivity – aims to illustrate how Nora reaches self-awareness and therefore disturbs masculine symbolic order.

KEYWORDS

Luce irigaray, a doll's house, buildungsroman, feminism

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1. Introduction

For hundreds of years, women, being secluded from society, had limited roles; learning domestic tasks, marrying at a young age, being a good and supportive wife, bearing children, and being a self-sacrificing mother. They were secluded from social affairs outside their homes (Digby, 1992). Generations after another naturally learned to accept their domestic roles. During different eras, there were several debates regarding the nature of women, which tried to provide a reason for women's inferiority and justify their seclusion from the public sphere into the private sphere. However, a few groups were against these debates, but neither did they try to credit women as individual subjects. By the time the Victorian era began, great reformations such as Industrial Revolution were taking place. These changes set the ground for women to start entering a territory that formerly belonged only to men.

Consequently, the established gender behaviors started being challenged, which sequentially set out Victorian women's activism, whose main concern was to gain subjectivity as human beings. The following movements were mainly organized and led by middle-class women whose leadership and public work was an indication of their potential for participation in the public sphere. Regarding characteristics of Victorian feminism, Barbara Caine in *English Feminism* notes, "celebration of women's self-sacrifice, which is seen as having the capacity to bring social and moral transformation, alongside a protest against the prevailing sexual hierarchy and an endorsement of rather conservative familial and moral values" (Caine 1997, 80-81). Today, many of early feminists' demands have been achieved. However, there are many unattended issues in the modern society of today that call for studies, such as the present one bringing issues women globally face to public attention.

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Henrik Ibsen has had a productive life in the history of literature. His principal interests in literature lie in social norms and standards, family merits, the pursuit of one's true identity, freedom, and women's rights. As the successful and the greatest Norwegian author, Ibsen seeks to unmask reality as it was and to play a mediatory role between literature and his community. Furthermore, he challenges the social norms to help people to shape their true identity in society. Being attentive to the impacts that patriarchy leaves on people's minds, he successfully raises public awareness of how the system's wrong policies trigger both men and women. In this regard, Amir Hossain claims:

Henrik Ibsen's plays can be viewed as a gallery of a portrait of various kinds of males and females through being trapped in societal realism and caught in the triviality of human life while struggling to seek truth and freedom out. (Hossain 2014, 137)

This play simultaneously addresses social, gender, and marital issues and outstandingly challenges the term feminism to encourage women to reflect on their usual suppressed will. *A Doll's House* represents the condition and status of women in familial life, a reflection of conventional standards, and a description of the dominant ideology in the 19th .c in Norway. Rather than intending to advocate for women, Ibsen tries to emphasize humanity. Some feminists declare that Ibsen reflects on women's rights, problems, and experiences throughout the play. According to Joan Templeton, "all-female, or no woman at all, Nora loses either way. Frivolous, deceitful, or unwomanly, she qualifies neither as a heroine nor as a spokeswoman for feminism" (Templeton 1989, 30). Sebnem Duzgun also claims that "regarded as a member of the inferior sex, Nora is dominated by her patriarchal-minded husband Helmer" (Duzgun 2018, 1).

In a patriarchal society, women are regarded as either loving wives or caring mothers. They always suppress their desires and dreams to fulfill the concept of self-sacrifice that has been ascribed to women and gain value and respect; to put it differently, they are thought to be representations of the abstract image of obedient women. Limitless nurturing roles and being selfless cause women to have low self-esteem, self-love and consider themselves as the inferior ones within their household, family, and society. The idea of female inferiority is well-rooted in history, enforced onto people's lives by means of law and religion; this argument by Saint Paul, in *Ephesians*, demonstrates this enforcement: "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church ... Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (Paul 2003, 1293).

Similarly, in *A Doll's House*, Nora, the female protagonist, unconsciously portrays the concept of the submissive wife. The ideas of a successful and prosperous marriage are successfully accomplished at the very beginning of the play by making Nora devote herself as an act of self-sacrifice for her children and her husband, accepting the dehumanizing notions that she is given by her husband and also her inferior woman role in her father's house. These are some manifestations of her being a very submissive woman initially; in this regard, Sebnem Duzgun declares as such:

The play displays the disempowerment of women in the male-dominated society of the late nineteenth century, but it also points to the possibility of the subversion of the oppressive patriarchal ideology that regards women as inferior through the resistance and counter-arguments of a middle-class woman who has been degraded by her father and husband. (Duzgun 2018, 86)

The story opens up with Nora entering the room to design the Christmas trees and trying her best to please her family. Nora has a conventional feminine role; she is the typical woman expected to accept the social orders and be satisfied by her limited social choices in a traditional society. Torvald, Nora's husband, not only objectifies her but also relegates her to animals such as a squirrel, a feather bird, etc. The play's atmosphere is a patriarchal society in which men like Torvald pull the strings of young women like Nora to gain the ability to control women. This play represents a conventional and modern conflict that sheds light on the relationships of characters in the setting of the 19th-century society in Norway. Guo Yuehua states that:

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* focuses on social and ideological aspects through how women are perceived, especially in the context of social values and duties of both men and women as reflected through marriage. In *A Doll's House*, men are seemingly in the dominant position, and they manipulate their power to control women in the ideological sphere so that their own identity and social status may be retained and be acknowledged by society. As exposed in *A Doll's House*, men are in a financially and ideologically superior position over women while women are kept in a subordinate position and are confined to their homes as they are not economically independent and have to rely on their husbands for support. (Yuehua 2009, 80-81)

Nora's life is tied to a secret that she has kept hidden for many years. She spends a significant amount of money in order to save his sick husband at the time, and then she keeps the fact that she has forged her father's signature to get that sum to herself. Such it becomes her great secret, so she has to work hard and pay her debt to Krogstad, the antagonist who lent her the money. Her secret is revealed as a result of a set of unlucky events. To Nora's surprise, Torvald, her husband, opposed what he had said earlier, selfishly blames Nora for her crime and worries about his own reputation. His reaction opens up a new realm of self-discovery and provides insights into the essence of the various challenges she might encounter in the future.

The familial life issues and the concept of marriage are shattered when the protagonist of the story reaches a state of selfawareness. Nora stops being a conventional woman, or in other words, a puppet that represents whatever society expects her to, and subsequently, she transgresses the social expectations of what femininity means. At the end of the play. Her main concern is to fight to gain her right not as a woman but as a human being. As such, Rayees Ahmad and Aasif Rashid Wani claim:

A Doll's House is a tragedy in which Nora leaves her house by slamming a door to the world of new possibilities. She is going off to know her own responsibilities towards herself. This kind of self-realization, which usually leads to a new beginning, is one of Ibsen's main ideologies posed in his play. Nora opens her eyes and observes that her individuality and freedom have been taken in living with Torvald Helmer. (Ahmad and Wani 2018, 52)

2. Method

"The gender of God, the guardian of every subject and discourse, is always masculine in the west" (Irigaray 1991, 166). Luce Irigaray argues that women must find out the true nature of their relationship with the world. The ignorance of women of their true essence prevents them from understanding who they are as complete human beings. Lenart Škof and Emily A. Holmes in *Breathing with Luce Irigaray* rightly note as such, "by stressing that human beings belong to nature so conceived, Irigaray can maintain that human beings have natures which need to grow and express themselves culturally" (Lenart and A. Holmes 2013, 2). Their argument directly addresses the role and experience of human beings with the order and structure of nature. A human being must consider themself as an individual who thinks regardless of one's sex and abilities; such abilities reflect on one's nature; thus, identity keeps changing culturally and socially. Therefore, the true identity of people is derived from what their nature is. Alison Stone claims that "Irigaray assumes that men and women naturally have different characters, implying that they are qualified for distinct ranges of activities" (Stone, 2016, p. 2).

According to Irigaray, trapped in the symbolic patterns of a patriarchal society, passive femininity grants a special privilege to men. Robert de Beaugrande admits that "Traditionally, the feminists tell us, the masculine view was accepted unthinkingly, whereas the feminine viewpoint was registered as a deviation" (de Beaugrande 1988, 253). Hence, society and the collective mind accept women as being submissive. She takes into account the structure and relations, which circulate in society, and then fills the gaps in the conception of femininity. In her writing style, she creates a position for women within a society that is fundamentally misogynist. Luce Irigarary claims:

If women's bodies must act as the form of exchange between men, it means that women ensure the foundation of the symbolic order, without ever gaining access to it, and so without being paid in a symbolic form for that task. It is their silence, their silent bodies - but yet productive - which regulate the smooth exchange between men and the social mechanism in general (Irigaray 1977, 71-72).

To attain a more accurate meaning of the concept of *spectualization*, Irigaray approaches it from a fresh point of view. Ofelia Schutte claims, "[In] Speculum Irigaray uses a postmodern perspective to challenge the hegemony of phallocentrism in philosophy, linguistics, and psychology" (Ofelia 2014, 64). In a patriarchal society, a woman is defined as an object that can claim *its* position only when all the symbols of masculinity and mindset of the society are inducted on them; otherwise, she does not have an independent meaning. In this regard, Luce Irigaray writes, "Any theory of the 'subject' has always been appropriated by the 'masculine'" (Irigaray 1985, 133-46). That is, a traditional society does not use masculine symbols to bargain with women. Instead, it bargains on their thoughts and genders; women, too, follow these symbols unconsciously. In this way, the concept of femininity in its original form becomes oppressed; therefore, it leads to women's imitation of a set of patterns in the patriarchal society. This imitation provides a strategy to control the essence of women and causes the dissolution of women's position and territory. According to Alison Martin:

In Irigaray's thought, sexual difference is not one question among others; it is not a single *issue* as such that can be resolved or cast aside. Nor is it a question restricted to gender relations if it is assumed that gender relations can be divorced from other differences and thereby compete for the top spot in a hierarchy of differences. For Irigaray, the difference comes to be in and through sexual difference; there is no measure of difference that can be beyond it, for all

the paradox of the neuter universal that claims to differ from the different and yet still denies difference. Hence the resolve: the sexual difference will open up a culture of difference. (Martin 2003, 2)

3. Discussion

3.1 Conventional woman

At the beginning of the story, the conventional concept of women's position shows the situation of a woman as a subject matter in the 19th century. The whole play tries to challenge the perspective toward gender differences and sexuality. Earlier in the story, the main character is trapped in both a symbolic masculine form and the form of a mother. Symbolic views determine patterns that oblige a woman in the role of a mother to sacrifice her desires and nurture her children. Therefore, the totality of her desires is built based on a social viewpoint and structure.

Nora, the female protagonist, is a woman whose only tasks include being a caring mother towards her children and being a wife who does the shopping, decorating of the house, ad serving her husband. *On Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigarary states that "for the fact that women are "weaker in their social interests" is obvious. The ambiguity, the double meaning, of that expression makes further comment unnecessary" (Irigaray 1985, 119). This marginalization covers a drastic difference between males and females. The play creates an atmosphere of the presence and the power of the man that is practiced from the very beginning. Further, in her book Irigaray (1985) explains how the wife is a part of the husband's property which is acquired by a contract, so called marriage. After the transmission of this possession from the father to the husband, it is now his job to protect the virtue of the woman in his possession, just like how the father used to protect his daughter's virginity while she was in his possession. Helmer, Nora's husband, also makes his best effort to control his wife's behavior in order to prevent any damage to his property. Luce Irigarary claims that:

For woman's work-which, we may agree, provisionally, stands in a privileged relation to "love," "family," and "home"-has not always had the trait of reclusiveness and social isolation that Freud notes and that he sees as women's "weaker social interests," "social inferiority." Only with the advent of the *patriarchal family* and, more particularly, with the *monogamous individual family* does housekeeping lose its social character and limit itself to "private service." "The wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production." And the succession of different property regimessiave, feudal, capitalist-has not altered the fact that a woman is possessed by the head of the family as a "mere instrument of production" and reproduction. (Luce 1985, 121)

The patterns of behavior, which are constructed culturally, are taken as a conventional regular norm. The concept of subjugation is introduced to recognize a form of patriarchal community and social organization. Ruthanne SooHee Pierson Crapo states that:

In her earliest published work on sexual difference, Speculum of the Other Woman, Irigaray takes a refractory examination of the cultural symbolic mirror, which assumes a male subject and views the world through his normative gaze, positing himself as the positive subject and everything else as a position constitutive of this male subject center. Indeed, the male gaze and hand form the basis of a perception of man's relationship to woman and others. Therefore, a woman, a blind spot, is the other of the male. (Crapo 2016, 14)

The term gender differences can be seen through the everyday experiences of the couple. Under the influence of social norms, Nora adapts some behaviors that are aligned with patriarchy. She is treated to be an inferior creature and a humble follower, so her voice is censored by cultural forces. In other words, the mind of a woman depends on the system of power, and also she is socially defined as a subject of the traditional society. Luce Irigarary, in her book, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, states that:

Does a woman really have the option of "loving" or "being loved"? Even if we admitted that this description of the female choice of the object in any way corresponded to reality. Femininity is instigated by a wave of passivity, by the transformations of the little girl's early instincts into instincts "with a passive aim" and by her perpetuating the "object" pole. When it really comes down to it, then, a woman will not choose, or desire, an "object" of love but will arrange matters so that a "subject" takes her as his "object." (Irigaray 1985, 113)

Nora, as a submissive woman, unconsciously reinforces the plight of her subjugation. This can be seen through the lens of male dominance. She does not speak for herself and does not help herself to redefine her nature in society. The concept of the female identity has been lost through the cultural concept and the male imaginary. The idealization of the notion of the feminine has a strong connection to social training:

HELMER. [In his room.] Is that my lark twittering there? NORA. [Busy opening some of her parcels.] Yes, it is. HELMER. Nora, Nora! What a woman you are! NORA. [Going to the fireplace.] Very well- as you please, Torvald. (Ibsen, 1987, p. 1-2)

Luce Irigarary on the Speculum of the Other Woman, admits that:

We can assume that any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the "masculine." When she submits to (such a) theory, the woman fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary. Subjecting herself to objectivization in discourse-by being "female." Re-objectivizing her own self whenever she claims to identify herself "as" a masculine subject. A "subject" that would re-search itself as lost (maternal-feminine) "object"? (Irigaray 1987, 133)

As society's obsession with gender binaries has bred women in a way to be humble and passive, Nora feels that she is not enough. Furthermore, as "the other," she believes that she must declare her position in the patriarchal society as a human being. Therefore, Nora must make a decision; either to choose her own nature to accept the cultural demands:

NORA. [Hums and smiles with covert glee.] H'm! If you only knew, Torvald, what expenses we lark and squirrels have. NORA. [Goes to the table on the right.] I shouldn't think of doing what you disapprove of. (p. 3)

3.2 Revolutionary woman

The unjust system of power had institutionalized inequality for women that is why women such as Nora fell victim to the wishes of the patriarchal society. The patriarchal community exploits not only the body but also the soul of the women. Nora, the main character of the play, realizes that life's meaning is not one-dimensional, but it has various meanings that she needs to differentiate and look for their origins. Luce Irigarary, in her book, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, says that:

as for *man*, who is by nature a slave, he is always changing in regard to the possession of his form. [...] Woman is closer to matter, then, and less able to take on her form according to the order of being. (Irigaray 1985, 164)

Her intention is to support women and eventually gain a kind of freedom for the people of that era, considering that male values have been used to define human essence, which has led to effective concealment of the meaning of the *woman* and being a woman. Nora, at the end of this play, iterates about her purpose in the most secretive layers of words.

HELMER. Why, Nora, how unreasonable and ungrateful you are! Have you not been happy here? NORA. No, never. I thought I was, but I never was. HELMER. Not- not happy! NORA. No; only merry. And you have always been so kind to me. But our house has been nothing but a play-room. Here I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I used to be papa's doll-child. And the children, in their turn, have been my dolls. I thought it fun when you played with me, just as the children did when I played with them. That has been our marriage, Torvald. (p. 42)

According to Irigaray, femininity in a symbolic way and symbolic patterns of a patriarchal and traditional society causes gender differentiation and grants a special privilege to men. Hence, society and the collective mind accept it. She takes into account the structure and male power relations in the society, reflects the limitations of the conception of femininity in her own writing, and creates a position for women within a society that has based all of its principles on masculinity. Luce Irigaray states that 'Woman ... cannot be located, cannot remain in her place. She attempts to envelop herself in clothes, make-up, and jewelry. She cannot use the envelope that she *is*, and so must create artificial ones" (Irigaray 1991, 169-70). Nora attempts to understand an existential principle of her essence and the ignorance of her nature by men. On *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray says, "Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" (Irigaray 1985, 23). She wants to seek her true identity in other ways. Patriarchal society limits women's thoughts and concepts.

NORA. No- you were perfectly right. That problem is beyond me. There is another to be solved first- I must try to educate myself.

NORA. That I no longer believe. I believe that before all else, I am a human being, just as much as you are- or at least that I should try to become one. (p. 42-43)

The reader is fully aware of the psychological states and the deep impact of Nora's social life while trying to change her life. This article complained in the strongest term about some patriarchal ideologies that enforce ideas including everybody can reach

prosperity simply with marriage and marriage guarantees human being's happiness. It cannot be denied that family life is a pure circumstance, but the main female character of this play, Nora, tries to save herself as a human being from lassitude to endeavor, especially manner and wisdom. In her, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray claims that:

The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts a woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) "subject" to reflect himself, to copy himself. Moreover, the role of "femininity" is prescribed by these masculine specula (riza)tion and corresponds scarcely at all to a woman's desire, which may be recovered only in secret, in hiding, with anxiety and guilt. (Irigaray 1985, 30)

At a turning point of the story, after revealing her great debt and the real nature of her husband, Nora becomes skeptical about her marital status, which turns into a deep dark spot. She transgresses the nurturing role of women and being controlled by men, which is an indication of Torvald's power and the patriarchal atmosphere of their house. Nora might know that a rebellious woman is expelled from society and even by her family in a traditional community. She finds out saving her husband's life is not meant to protect their entire life. After coming to such realization, instead of her prior suicide plan, she now walks away by slamming the door as a sign of protest not only as a woman but also as a human being to gain her own rights. It is worthy to note that, as a proud woman of the 19th century, Nora is the representation of the empowerment of female identity.

HELMER. Oh, this is unheard of! And from so young a woman! But if religion cannot keep you right, let me appeal to your conscience, for I suppose you have some moral feeling? Or, answer me: perhaps you have none?

NORA. Well, Torvald, it's not easy to say. I really don't know- I am all at sea about these things. I only know that I think quite differently from you about them. I hear, too, that the laws are different from what I thought: but I can't believe that they can be right. (p. 43)

4. Conclusion

This study has followed the development of a typical conventional woman of a heavily masculine-centered era in which women were treated as dependent entities that did not have autonomous identities of their own. This research argued that women were secluded within the boundaries of their homes and were only defined as a daughter, a wife, or a mother as though there was nothing more to being a woman. In the beginning, Nora, the woman, is not that different from her female contemporaries; she is a submissive wife and a loving mother for her family, which is her first priority. She sacrifices herself for their well-being, which is shown in the form of the big debt she has. However, she gradually notices the unfair treatment her kind receives in society and starts to question her way of living, her beliefs, and her true self as a woman, a human being. Finally, the ending scene manifests her strong protest against this inequality and injustice. This study based its exploration on the ideas of Luce Irigaray about women's exclusion from the practical and cultural side of society. Although this study has explored the Victorian era, it should be mentioned that women in today's world are still struggling to have their own voice and identity; therefore, more studies on the matter are needed in order for women to gain their own authentic self. For further studies, we would like to suggest future fellow researchers conduct a similar approach and examine contemporary works as a comparison between women of then and today to demonstrate a road map of how far feminism and women's movements have come.

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