



Breaking the Metanarrative and towards Micro Narrative: A Postmodernistic Study of Ibsen's A Doll's House

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Abstract: The ideology of the world is so possessed by 'meta narrative' that it is almost impossible to break the shackles of the Metanarrative and follow the path of 'micro narrative' even in the postmodern world. The inquisitive mind of the Postmodern people rejects the Kantian hypothesis of 'objective truth' and they embrace Derrida's idea of 'difference' vis-à-vis Lyotard's insightful observation of micro-narratives. It is an age of pluralism where every individual craves for creating their own identity by rejecting totalitarianism. The techno arts or technical advancement helps people to distort such 'absolute reality' or 'totality'. As the title of the article suggests this paper will try to examine Nora from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, keeping in mind the binary opposition of the postmodern world such as – Structure/de-structure, Centre/De-center, Grand narrative/Micro narrative, Legitimization/De-legitimization. This article will try to highlight how the self-realization of Nora that her mind is possessed by the totalitarian knowledge of patriarchy and her negotiation of static 'duty' towards her husband constitute her identity as a postmodern woman – a woman who questions 'traditionalism' and falsify the 'whole' or 'center'. Finally, this article will show Nora's trial of destroying the patriarchal discourse and her trial to de-center the phallocentric notion.

Keywords: Postmodern, Grand narrative, Micro narrative, Discourse, Objective truth, Identity

Introduction:

From ancient times women have been treated by their male counterparts as non-existent creatures or none other than pro-creation machines, who were just born to serve. The ideology which unconsciously structured in the mind of males and females is that females should have the characteristics of 'submissiveness', 'dutiful' towards their male counterparts, and will always indulge themselves in the household work and males should be the 'aggressor', 'oppressor'. Female identity as 'other' was constructed by the patriarchal society to establish male supremacy. Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking work *The Second Sex* portrays the role of society in creating women as the 'second' sex and the systematic role of the society behind gender discrimination. "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman"(Beauvoir). This perhaps depicted the gradual development of a female child's consciousness and when the innocence of the nakedness of the body is over, they start to grab unconsciously the codes, rules, and regulations of the society, which forced them to become a 'woman'.

Before beginning any discussion on the man/woman binary first we must ask: What does it mean by 'manliness' and what does it mean by 'womanliness'? Merriam Webster dictionary states 'manliness' as 'the quality or state of being manly (as by having qualities such as strength, or virility that are traditionally associated with a man) // They'd been trained to identify emotional repression as the essence of manliness. Men who broke down, or cried, or admitted to feeling fear, weaklings, failures. Not man (Pat Barker); and womanliness as the quality or state of being womanly as in having qualities such as beauty or gentleness that are traditionally associated with a woman. In regard to this definition, women are designated as emotionally weak and men are not men if they are emotionally weak.

In a patriarchal society, the name of the father and husband constituted the identity of a woman. The traditional male ideology enforced male as the 'breadwinner' and female as the 'bread-cook', who will always be oppressed or subjugated in the name of 'duty' and 'motherhood'. Feminism, a movement against the patriarchal ideology demands social equality among the sexes and tries to de-center those binary notions of strong and weak, superior and inferior, masculinity and femininity. Chaman Nahal in his article "Feminism in English Fiction" defines feminism as " a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group. When women free themselves of the dependence

syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes." Concentrating on the micro-narratives of the postmodern world this study will examine the character of Nora who dares to de-center the 'phallogocentrism' and 'grand narrative', carried by her husband Torvald Helmer. Throughout the play, the readers can feel the agony of Nora for being a 'woman'. But the journey of Nora to find respect and throwing off her doll's dress makes her an evolutionary/revolutionary woman, who gives a thunderbolt on patriarchal discourse. The evolution of Nora is well observed by G.B. Shaw in *A Doll's House Again* – "The woman's eyes are opened, and instantly her doll's dress is thrown off and her husband left staring at her, helpless...". By giving a brief introduction to the postmodern theory of Lyotard and Deleuze and Guattari, this article will concentrate on Torvald's acceptance of the patriarchal discourse vis-à-vis grand narrative; Nora's de-legitimization of patriarchal discourse, grand narrative, and finally how Nora from a traditional woman evolves as a postmodern woman.

Postmodernism:

Postmodernism as a mode of discourse developed by Lyotard. With the publication of *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979, Lyotard significantly speaks about the problem of established knowledge. The postmodern philosophy champions heterogeneity and difference in knowledge. In the foreword of *The Postmodern Condition*, Fredrick Jameson utters "The seemingly neutral review of a vast body of material on contemporary science and problems of knowledge or information proves on closer inspection to be a kind of crossroads in which a number of different themes – a number of different books – intersect and problematize each other" (*The Postmodern Condition*). The postmodern knowledge has the problem of legitimacy as "knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production" (*The Postmodern Condition*, 4). Lyotard distinctively declared Postmodernism as "incredulity towards metanarratives". The postmodernists emphasized the fragmentation of pluralism in society. Unlike the modern people, the modern people, the postmodern people hanker after creating their own individual truth. The narratives in the postmodern world become 'micro narratives'.

In an article Ria Farham exhibit – "Postmodern people are quite comfortable with the concept that different people will come to different conclusions about the same subject and all of them have discovered the truth, even if such truths contradict each other. The ethics or the philosophy of postmodernism accepts the distortion of 'meta narratives' and conveys the notion that knowledge can't be static. Keshav Raj Chalise in the article "Lyotard's *The*

Postmodern Condition: Issues of Knowledge and Legitimacy" defined modernity as 'the age of metanarrative legitimization' and postmodern as 'the age in which metanarratives have become bankrupt'.

Guattari and Deleuzian's 'rhyzomatics' advocated the interconnectedness of life and discarded the central root of any knowledge. They viewed the equal importance and dominance of coherence where universality is subverted by difference. The postmodern condition gives place to uncertainty, duality, and multiplicity, rather than certainty, singularity, unitary, or center. A unitary discourse is replaced by a multiplicity of discourses. Jacques Derrida's theory of 'differance' also has intrinsic effects on the philosophy of postmodernism. Derridian theory of 'deconstruction' also rejected the totality of knowledge. The term 'differance' has two parts 'to differ' (significantly there has a difference in any knowledge) and 'to defer' (the continuous delay of getting any fixed meaning). The difference in intelligence and multiple knowledge of individuals demand the right to decide the truth for themselves. Ria Farham in "Understanding Postmodernism: Philosophy and Culture of Postmodernism" states – "In the past truth was a clearly defined fact that was generally accepted by each generation... As postmodern people search for their truth, they base their conclusions on their own research, individual experiences, and personal relationships instead on the truth accepted by their parents, government or church".

The old principles in the postmodern age are called into question. To question that 'absolute truth' is what makes a people – a postmodern people.

Ibsen and his *A Doll's House*:

Henrik Ibsen is regarded as one of the creators of modern drama. Born in 1828 at Skien in South-East Norway on 20th March to prosperous middle-class parents. In 1851 he joins National Theatre at Bergen as artistic director and administrator. In 1857 he leaves Bergen to become artistic director and manager of the Norwegian Theatre at Christiana. After the closing of The Norwegian Theatre, he joins The Christiania Theatre in 1863. *The Feast at Solhaug* becomes his first stage success in 1856. This play was published on 4th December 1879 and first performed in Copenhagen on 21st December 1879. The first performance in German translation in February 1880 "provoked storm of protest and Ibsen was forced to supply an alternative 'happy' ending in which Nora is reconciled to Helmer" (Sen, xiv). To Krishna Sen Ibsen "loved storm and *A Doll's House* provoked one of the greatest storms

of all, not just in the theatre but also in society" (Sen, xi). The first American performance of the play in a translation by William M. Lawrence entitled *The Child Wife* with a happy German ending. Henry Arthur Jones and Pinero had introduced the play into England and performed an adaptation with the 'German' ending titled *Breaking a Butterfly*.

Ibsen has explored many issues like 'power of money', 'woman question', 'patriarchy', 'freedom', 'hypocrisy of society in the play *A Doll's House*. A short poem of three quatrains which he wrote to clarify the theme of the play, and is translated as a prose poem by McFarlane:

They sat there, those two, in a house in autumn and in winter days. Then the house burnt. All lies in ruins. Those two must rake in the ashes. For among them a jewel is hidden, a jewel that can never burn. And if they search diligently, it might perhaps be found by him or her. But even if that fire-scarred pair ever do find that precious fire-proof jewel – she will never find her burnt faith, he never his burnt happiness (Sen, xxv).

Torvald Helmar- a follower of Patriarchal Discourse and Grand Narrative:

For a long time, patriarchy is considered a discourse to be followed by both males and females apart in order to be a part of the so-called civilized society. For Foucault (1972), discourses are about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority. Power simply is preventing someone to complete his or her wishes. Torvald Helmer accepted the patriarchal discourses and makes himself the sole and authoritative figure of the house; cutting down his wife's individuality. Foucault (1979 in Olsson, 2010) states, "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere. . . Power comes from below; that is there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations . . . no such duality extending from the top down." Similarly, in the play, both Torvald and Nora are under the clutch of power or discourse. Torvald must have to carry patriarchy constructed by the society and Nora must have to get fear her husband who represented patriarchy. The sword brought by Nora for the son and the doll for the daughter also indicates the preservation of meta-narrative and sex roles. Not only Nora is a doll at the hand of her husband but also Torvald is a doll at the hand of the society who unconsciously follows the tradition of meta-narrative (that a woman must have to take the permission or consent of her husband in order to take a loan to save her husband's

life). The metanarrative words like permission, consent, and forgiveness are associated with males and the females are born to take permission, consent, and forgiveness- Ah poor little Nora, I understand – you can't bring yourself to believe I've forgiven you. But I have, Nora, I swear. I've forgiven everything. I know perfectly well that you did all this out of love for me (199). While Nora is about to break that metanarrative by forsaking her husband and children Torvald says: You are turning your back on your most sacred duties. (202). Even Torvald tries to teach Nora how a wife should behave. For Foucault Discourse is interwoven with power and knowledge, which constitutes the oppression of different groups. And here in *A Doll's House* Nora falls under a marginalized or oppressed group.

The binary of bread earner/bread cook, office work/household work also emerges from patriarchal discourse. A discourse where a girl's mind is structured to serve others and live for others; and a boy's mind is structured to be the bread earner of a family. Jacques Lacan's utterance "the unconscious is structured like a language" is very significant here. Lacan's The Symbolic stage of human life, where a child's unconscious mind is created by the people around him or her plays a significant role in the vast expanse of life. The Patriarchal discourse was unconsciously created in the mind of Torvald and Nora at an early age. They merely follow what society expects from them. They are just a mere actor in the hand of society. Nora's heart felt trial to prolong the tarantella dance indicates the fear that Nora has for her husband. Nora felt as long as the tarantella dance will be alive; her relationship with her husband will stay alive. Torvald's fear of the destruction of his reputation and his oppressive nature makes him a carrier of the grand narrative. Not only that, but Nora's activity in the early part of the drama also makes Nora a follower of the structure and objective truth of the society.

Nora's De-legitimization of Meta Narrative and creation of a New Discourse:

On one hand, Women can be suppressed by the discourse, but on the other hand, women can empower and create their own identities with the help of the discourse. De-Legitimization, which is one of the key motifs of the

postmodern world finds its way in Nora Helmer. Though Nora the initial part of the drama followed the legitimized Meta Narrative, at the end "the sound of a door slamming shut" crushed the Meta Narrative and assisted to establish Nora as a Postmodern woman. Nora's forsaking of Torvald's house is "but a journey in search of self-respect and apprenticeship of life" ("A Doll's House Again"). The sound of the slamming door is a slap on patriarchal discourse and also it's a warning of emerging micro-narrative in the age of Pluralism. G.B. Shaw in "A Doll's House Again" predicted a new order, where the patriarchy will no longer rule and where there will be no gender distinction between "breadwinner" and "bread-cook" – "The slam of the door behind her is more momentous than the cannon of Waterloo, or Sedan because when she comes back, it will not be to the old home; for when the patriarch no longer rules, and the "breadwinner" acknowledges his dependence, there is an end of the old order; and an institution upon which so much human affection and suffering have been lavished." Nora's revolt at the end of the drama asserts that humanity and man's rejection of equality can't go side by side. Nora's forsaking of her husband and children will not be futile and the ethics of postmodernism will be achieved if that sound of the slamming door annihilates the gender distinction.

'The modern-day tragedy' as Ibsen points out that women are judged according to the laws of man – "there are two kinds of moral law, two kinds of conscience, one in the man and a completely other one in the woman. They do not understand one another; but the women is judged in practical life according to the man's law, as if she were not a woman but a man" (Norton Critical Edition, 477). But Nora in the play tried to create her own law. A discourse that is long-established Nora dares to reject and started to get out from the tag 'victim of oppression'. Rejecting 'phallogocentrism', she dares to abandon the role of a wife and a mother and goes on to question those long-established discourses. The argument between Nora with Torvald at the end of the play may be because of the 'wonderful thing' that happens to Nora. This 'wonderful thing' is Nora's understanding of her true self, her caged position in Torvald's house, as well as her understanding of creating her own identity. The argument came out of Nora's inquisitiveness. The argument runs like this:

Nora: Tomorrow I am going home- back to my old hometown, I mean. It'll be easier for me to find something to do up there.

Helmer: You blind inexperienced creature!

Nora: I have to try to get some experience, Torvald.

Torvald: Abandon your home, your husband, your children! Do you have any idea what people will say? Nora: I can't worry about that; I only know what I have to do.

Helmer: It's grotesque! You're turning your back on your most sacred duties!

Nora: What do you think those are – my most sacred duties?

Helmer: I have to tell you? Aren't they to your husband and children?

Nora: I have other duties equally sacred.

Helmer: No, you don't! Like what? Nora: Duties to myself.

Helmer: You're a wife and mother, first and foremost.

Nora: I don't believe that anymore. I believe that, first and foremost, I'm a human being – just as much as you – or at least I should try to become one. (Norton Critical Edition, 202)

The above argument clearly indicates the inquisitiveness of Nora. Nora dares to question – What is duty? What is morality? Or is "A women has no right to spare her dying father's feelings, or save her husband's life?" Nora's rational mind perceived that if Torvald's first duty isn't to her, then Nora's first duty is to herself, not to her husband.

Nora tried to create a new discourse vis-s-vis her identity by freeing herself from the burden of married life. The tarantella dance is an obvious example of Nora's fear and struggle in married life. The character of Nora till the tarantella dance is over, represents those women who are victimized by the male-dominated society. Rather than being a silent victim of oppression, Nora returns the marriage ring to Torvald. 'Ring' represents the patriarchal discourse which is a symbol of 'the demands of the society; it is a symbol of oppression. But returning of the 'ring' asserts Nora's craving for getting out of that bondage.

To the Postmodernist distortion of the 'objective truth' is fundamental. Ria Farhan in "Understanding Postmodernism: Philosophy and Culture of Postmodern" categorizes people into two classes – cultural-sterile and

cultural-liberate. Cultural-sterile are those people who are concerned with the cultural codes of society. They go on to perform the performative role as society ascribed to them. But Cultural-liberate people are creative. They dare to break the shackles of societal norms. In the play, Torvald is Cultural-sterile, who unquestionably accepts the patriarchy and unconsciously oppressed Nora but Nora is Cultural-liberate, who desires to discover her own truth.

Conclusion:

At first glance, *A Doll's House* does not seem very Postmodernistic, but Nora's journey from a doll to 'search for her own individual identity' established her as a postmodernist woman, who does not follow the 'objective truth', rather creates her truth. Ibsen might have created Nora's character to challenge the traditional patriarchal discourse of society. Gilbert and Gubar identified "the angel of the home" and "the mad woman in the attic" as the main stereotypical tendency of society. But Nora tried to replace that "angel of the home" with the angel of the public life, which represents female autonomy. Nora's forsaking of the most "sacred duties" towards her husband and children, despite Torvald's continuous appeal to continue their marriage bond, exhibits an awakening of the "most wonderful thing". But the ending of the play is a bit tricky, as after "slamming the door" Nora's searching for 'self-identity' and 'freedom' is successful or not. Nora takes the risk of creating identity in a world where the human mind unconsciously is possessed by patriarchal discourse. Nevertheless, unlike the other "angel of the home," Nora tried to make an experiment with her own life, where she will be the sole authoritative figure of her own life.

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