



THE ROLE OF FEMALE GENDER IN A MALE DOMINATED SOCIETY IN *AMINATA* BY FRANCIS IMBUGA AND HENRIK IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

¹Cherono Faith Rono, ²Dr. Margaret Njoki Mwhia

¹School of Social Sciences, ²School of Social Sciences

¹Department of Languages and Humanities

¹Mount Kenya University, Thika, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Gender inequality has been a persistent problem in societies worldwide, particularly in those where men hold a dominant position in social, economic, and political spheres. Literature has been a powerful tool for highlighting such issues and creating awareness among the masses. Through a comparative analysis of the two plays, *A Dolls House* by Henrik Ibsen and *Aminata* by Francis Imbuga, the study examined the challenges faced by female characters in asserting themselves in patriarchal societies and the potential for female agency to bring about social change. It explored how the female characters subvert the patriarchal norms and challenge the societal expectations imposed on them. The study used second wave of feminist theory to examine the way in which female identity has been presented by authors from different countries through patriarchal critique; with differing cultural backgrounds, gender and style in their works. Data analysis was done through textual analysis. The findings revealed that both plays portrayed the struggles faced by female characters as they confronted oppressive gender norms within their respective societies. When they attempted to challenge these deeply ingrained norms, they encountered not only resistance but also shunning from their communities. The struggles are reflective of the broader systemic issues women faced during that era. It was concluded that women are becoming more resilient to fight for their social and cultural space, and no longer bow down to patriarchal demands. The study recommends that women who challenge oppressive societal structures, should be recognized and their resilience and triumphs celebrated.

Keywords: Role, Gender, Resilient, Male, Women, Dominated, Feminism

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, women have been systematically excluded from positions of power and have been relegated to subordinate roles in society. This has resulted in the perpetuation of gender-based discrimination and the marginalization of women in various aspects of social, economic, and political life. Patriarchy is the prime obstacle to women advancement and development.

Feminism has taken many forms throughout history, with various waves of the feminist movement emerging in response to changing social, economic, and political contexts. Some of the key strands of feminist theory include liberal feminism, which focuses on achieving gender equality through legal reforms and policy changes; radical feminism, which seeks to fundamentally transform social and political structures to eliminate gender-based inequalities; and inter-sectional feminism, which recognizes the inter-sectional nature of multiple forms of oppression, such as race, class, and gender, and seeks to address these intersections in the pursuit of social justice (Conaghan, 2000). Feminism has had a significant impact on society, with feminist movements and activists working to advance women's rights and challenge gender-based discrimination and oppression.

Historically, women in many African societies were subject to patriarchal systems that limited their education, opportunities, and autonomy. However, contemporary African literature often challenges these stereotypes and presents a more nuanced and diverse view of women's experiences. Some African writers have focused specifically on the experiences of women and the challenges they face in their societies. For example, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel "Half of a Yellow Sun" explores the lives of women during the Nigerian-Biafran War in the 1960s. Other African writers have portrayed women as strong, capable, and independent individuals who are able to resist and challenge patriarchal systems.

The proposed study makes a deep analysis of *A Dolls House* and *Aminata*, in view of the role of women, in a world that has greatly been dominated by men. It seeks to explore the ways in which these two plays challenge traditional gender roles and expectations. Both plays offer powerful critiques of patriarchal systems and explore the ways in which women are often marginalized and oppressed within those systems.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by the second wave of feminism. Second-wave feminists critically examined the patriarchal nature of society, which privileges men and subordinates women. The patriarchal nature of these societies is depicted through the actions and attitudes of male characters, who exert control over women's lives and choices. Among the pioneers is Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797): Wollstonecraft is often considered the mother of modern feminism. In her book "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792), she argued that women are not naturally inferior to men, but rather are made so by unequal access to education and opportunities.

Hooks (1984) argues that patriarchy is a key concept in feminist theory and it refers to a social system in which men hold primary power and authority, both in the private and public spheres. This system of power and authority is often maintained through cultural norms, social institutions, and individual behavior that privilege men over women (hooks, 1984). By privileging men over women, patriarchy limits the full potential and contributions of half of the population and perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes and inequalities (Mkhize & Njawala, 2016).

To challenge patriarchy, feminist theorists advocate for a range of strategies, from individual resistance and consciousness-raising to systemic change and collective action (Smith, 1974). These strategies can include everything from challenging gendered norms and stereotypes to advocating for policies that promote gender equity and justice.

By using feminist this approach to analyze the aforementioned texts, the researcher understands the ways in which gendered power dynamics are constructed and maintained within each society. This can include an examination of the ways in which male characters in each play use their power to control and oppress the female characters, as well as an exploration of the ways in which female characters resist and challenge these power dynamics.

3.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research study used a qualitative methods and more so descriptive research design, which involved an in-depth close reading and analysis of the selected texts to identify patterns, themes, and motifs, intended by the author. The aim of descriptive design is particularly useful for examining how specific themes or concepts are represented and discussed in texts, as well as how these representations relate to broader social and cultural contexts (Given, 2008). Since this research design focuses on a textual analysis approach, the population was not limited to a specific demographic or geographic location. Rather, the target audience would be anyone who has access to the selected plays, either through published works or performances, and has an interest in analyzing the representation of female gender in a male-dominated society. The study targeted all texts that make use of feminist approach, from which *A dolls house* by Henrik Ibsen and *Amita* by Francis Imbuga were purposefully selected for the purpose of this study. Purposive sampling describes a collection of distinct techniques in non probability sampling. Mujere (2016) argue that purposeful sampling is based on the researcher's judgment when choosing the units to be analyzed.

The researcher used two sources of data;

i. Primary source.

This was done by reading, analyzing and interpreting given excerpts extracted from the text. The researcher used a data collection guide, which ensured consistency, reliability and validity of the data collected throughout the process.

ii. Secondary source.

Data was also obtained from critical essays, and scholarly articles related to the two plays, which provided valuable insights into the role of female gender in a male-dominated society. The obtained was recorded and organized systematically.

To analyse the data, the researcher employed textual analysis. This was done by reading the plays several times to gain a deeper understanding of the text's themes, characters, and language. The researcher then identified specific passages or scenes that illustrate the role of female gender and how it relates to the male-dominated society in which the plays are set. Feminism theory was incorporated in the feminist texts selected, to guide the discourse on gender issues.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The roles of female characters in both *Aminata* and *A Doll's House* undergo transformation throughout the narratives. These roles reveal various dimensions, shaped not only by the characters' individual choices and actions but also by the societal and cultural environments they inhabit.

4.1 The role of women in *Aminata*

Aminata, Imbuga's play, explores the politics of power and gender as played out in the fictional community of Membe. The author presents a patriarchal society using characters in various scenes such as that of Jumba who constantly ensures that *Aminata* doesn't inherit land since she is female. Elsewhere, during arguments with Rosina, Jumba constantly reminds her how he is the head of the family. Ababio, *Aminata*'s brother believes that men are superior and way above women. Men, especially the drunk and irresponsible ones, subject their wives to domestic violence, intimidation and harassment, but also regard women in general as inferior.

Ababio: *Aminata* is not my sister. She is a beast, a she-elephant that wants to trample everyone underfoot....

Ababio: Ask her to go and bring back my wife and children first.

This portrayal highlights the harsh realities that women face in their daily lives, revealing the pervasive nature of gender-based violence and the vulnerability of women within this society. In addition, the language employed by the character Ababio in his description of *Aminata* is emblematic of the entrenched misogyny within the community. Referring to *Aminata* as a "beast" and a "she-elephant" dehumanizes her, reducing her to derogatory animalistic terms.

Societies have historically confined women to culturally prescribed roles, primarily centered around domestic chores and what are often referred to as "domestic spaces." This societal expectation is rooted in traditional gender norms that limit women's activities and opportunities to the domestic sphere, relegating them to household duties and care-giving roles.

Kezia: "...No, *Dagitari*, *Aminata* is over-doing it. A woman is not a woman if she has no time for her husband and her children. That is why you are playing this game of boredom. You have made *Aminata* the husband in your house..."

Kezia's view that "a woman is not a woman if she has no time for her husband and her children" encapsulates the deeply ingrained belief that a woman's identity is intrinsically tied to her roles as a wife and mother. This perspective reinforces the societal expectation that women prioritize their duties within the household, often at the expense of personal aspirations or interests. Kezia's characterization of *Aminata* as having assumed the role of the husband in her house underscores the resistance to women's pursuit of activities beyond the domestic sphere, highlighting the complex interplay between cultural norms and individual agency in challenging or perpetuating traditional gender roles.

The dialogue between Jumba and his wife Rosina in "*Aminata*" underscores the deeply ingrained gender roles and expectations within the society portrayed in the play. It highlights how women have been conditioned to believe that leadership, symbolized by the "stool," is exclusively reserved for men. Jumba's decision to resign from the stool in favor of his wife challenges this traditional norm, eliciting a swift response from Rosina.

Jumba: Good, now look at our family, Nyarango's family, who among us is fit to provide a replacement, not so?

Rosina: I am a woman, have you forgotten that?"

This exchange reflects the enduring power dynamics that pervade the society in "*Aminata*." It illustrates how the community has conditioned women to accept their subordinate roles and to question their suitability for positions of leadership.

In addition, the exchange between Ababio and *Aminata* reveals the ingrained gender dynamics and the personal animosities that characterize the interactions between male and female characters in the play. Ababio's reaction to *Aminata*'s words reveals his discomfort with women expressing themselves and advocating for their rights. He accuses *Aminata* of constantly "propping up women," suggesting that he resents her for supporting female voices and empowerment. This reflects Ababio's deeply patriarchal and misogynistic mindset, where any assertion of female agency is seen as a threat to male dominance.

In the context of feminism's second wave, which emerged primarily in the 1960s and 1970s (Thornham, 2004), the exchange between Ababio and *Aminata* serves as a clear illustration of the pervasive gender dynamics and entrenched patriarchal attitudes that were central concerns of the movement. The second wave feminist movement critiques the patriarchal power structures and the advocacy for women's rights, autonomy, and equality (Whelehan, 1995). Through Ababio's reaction to *Aminata*'s expression of her beliefs and advocacy for women's empowerment, there is a clear manifestation of gender dynamics that uphold male dominance and marginalize female voices. His discomfort with *Aminata*'s assertiveness and advocacy for women's rights reflects a broader societal resistance to the changing roles and expectations of women during the second wave feminist era.

Arguably, Francis Imbuga manages to successfully highlight the spirited fights put up by various women characters, as majorly represented by Aminata. Despite the overwhelming pressure to conform to societal norms and expectations, Aminata displays remarkable resilience and agency in challenging the status quo. Despite these societal expectations, Aminata's inner strength and determination begin to emerge as she confronts the injustices and limitations imposed upon her. The author uses Aminata's character to explore themes of female empowerment and resistance in the face of oppressive gender dynamics. Through her journey, the playwright highlights the strength and resilience of women who dare to challenge the status quo and assert their agency in male-dominated societies. Aminata's defiance serves as an inspiration for other women facing similar struggles, encouraging them to pursue their own paths to liberation and self-determination.

4.2 The Role of Women in *A Doll's House*

Bertolt presents an image of a dependent woman, who needs a man to be financially able. Women at this time were expected to get married, have children, and stay at home to tend to their children and husband. When a woman actually had a job and earned money, like Nora copying lines in secret, it was "like being a man." Women had very few opportunities to make money for themselves and had to rely on husbands or fathers to provide for their needs.

Nora: "... (Speaking quickly) You might give me money, Torvald. Only just as much as you can afford; and then one of these days I will buy something with it..."

Women were often seen as the property of their husbands or fathers, and their financial well-being was contingent on the men in their lives. Nora's character embodies the struggles faced by women of her time. Her secret job of copying lines, although seemingly trivial, represents a significant act of defiance against these gender norms. It allows her a taste of financial autonomy, akin to "being a man" in a society where women had limited opportunities to earn money for themselves.

In addition, she is shown as someone who diligently fulfills her husband Torvald's expectations and adheres to the societal norms of her era. Her willingness to bow to Torvald's suggestions and her submissive aspect shows the limited authority that women were expected to have within their marriages and households. Nora's role is primarily focused on maintaining the household, pleasing her husband, and conforming to his desires. Her dialogue, such as her willingness to follow Torvald's plans and not go against his wishes, exemplifies the societal expectations placed upon women to be compliant, nurturing, and obedient to their husbands. This serves as a reflection of the traditional gender roles and expectations that constrained women in the late 19th century.

The patriarchal system has looked down on women's emotional needs, as theirs come second to the male's. Torvald fails to recognize Nora's feelings and often selfishly, puts his own feelings before her own. The terms of endearment used by Torvald, such as "little lark," "squirrel," and "skylark," further illustrate the infantilization of women and the objectification of Nora within the context of their marriage.

Helmer: And I would not wish you to be anything but just what you are, my sweet little skylark...

Torvald's expressions of affection, while seemingly endearing, reveal a patronizing attitude towards Nora, positioning her as an ornamental figure meant to amuse and please him. Nora's acceptance of these pet names and her willingness to play the role of the compliant and submissive wife underscore her internalized conformity to the societal norms of the time.

Women are considered to have inadequate or no knowledge at all on financial matters, hence cannot be trusted to make financial moves. Nora, as a symbol of such women in the society, is undermined severally by her husband Torvald, and her friend Mrs Linde. To Torvald, Nora is nothing but a spendthrift;

Helmer: bought, did you say? All these things? Has my little spendthrift been wasting money again?

Torvald, dismissively refers to her as a "spendthrift," portraying her as irresponsible and wasteful. This characterization reflects the societal norm that relegated women to domestic roles and denied them the agency to manage their own finances. Nora's financial dependence and the demeaning tone used by Torvald exemplify the gendered power dynamics of the era, where women were often marginalized and dis-empowered in financial decision-making.

According to Nicholson (1986), in the late 19th century, societies adhered to strict gender roles that dictated the behavior and responsibilities of men and women within the family. Men were expected to be the breadwinners and heads, while women were confined to the domestic sphere, responsible for care giving and maintaining the house. These traditional gender roles influenced family expectations, reinforcing the idea of women as submissive and dependent on their husbands for financial and social support. In the context of feminism, Risman (2019) observes that these societal norms and expectations are oppressive and discriminatory, as they limit women's autonomy and perpetuate gender inequality. Feminism seeks to challenge such patriarchal structures by advocating for gender equality and the liberation of women from unfair gender roles.

As the play progresses, Chang (2004) posits that Nora's disillusionment with her marriage and her realization of her own worth lead her to reject the stifling family expectations that have defined her life. Her decision to leave Torvald and their children in the final act symbolizes her rejection of societal norms and her assertion of individual agency and autonomy. Nora's actions challenge the conventional notions of family and womanhood, advocating for personal growth and self-fulfillment outside the confines of traditional gender roles.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to examine the role of female gender in a male-dominated society as portrayed in the two plays. Throughout the study, it became evident that women in both "Aminata" and "A Doll's House" faced formidable challenges deeply rooted in gender-based oppression. These challenges ranged from traditional gender roles and societal expectations to overt discrimination and limitations imposed by male-dominated cultures. However, the female characters in these narratives demonstrated remarkable resilience, agency, and the capacity to challenge the status quo. The texts emphasize the interplay between individual agency and external influences, showcasing factors that shape the roles and experiences of women in oppressive environments. By exploring these narratives, the study sheds light on the enduring relevance of gender dynamics, the importance of challenging traditional norms, and the enduring human spirit to break free from oppressive structures.

Based on the findings, the study recommends that societies should implement gender sensitization programs that educate both men and women about the harmful effects of gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles. In addition, empowerment initiatives for women, such as education and vocational training, should be expanded and supported. This will equip women with the skills and knowledge needed to challenge oppressive gender norms and gain economic independence.

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