

## A Complex Web of Domesticity: A Comparative Study of Ibsen's *Doll's House* and Narayan's *A Dark Room*

NITASHA BALORIA  
Phd Research Scholar  
University of Jammu  
Jammu (J&K)  
India

### Abstract:

*The word "housewife" is a complex one. It automatically carries with it a load full of responsibilities, which a woman feels happy to perform, for the happiness of her loved ones. But in the course of performing responsibilities, a housewife expects little love and respect from the other members of the society. This paper deals with the comparative study of Henry Ibsen's "Doll's House" and R. K. Narayan's "A Dark Room". In this paper the main objective is to unveil the bitter truth of the lives of two housewives in these works.*

**Key words:** Domesticity, second wave feminist, patriarchy, Housewife.

What is the definition of a "Housewife"? What are the features that define a "good and happy housewife"? What are the duties of a "responsible housewife"? What sort of punishment should be given if she doesn't want to be an "obeying housewife"? Before seeking answers to these so-called simple questions, let's start with a one more very simple question- Who is a "housewife"? Is she a superhuman or a robot? The answer is obviously, a big "No". She is a female, a woman, or should I say a "human". A woman who was a dearest daughter of her parents and a loving sister etc. But after being married, she is a "Housewife". The word "housewife" is a complex one. It automatically carries with it a load full of responsibilities,

which a woman feels happy to perform, for the happiness of her loved ones. But in the course of performing responsibilities, a housewife expects little love and respect from the other members of the society. This paper deals with the comparative study of Henry Ibsen's "*Doll's House*" and R. K. Narayan's "*A Dark Room*". In this paper the main objective is to unveil the bitter truth of the lives of two housewives in these works. But before starting, it is important to clear that both the writers don't belong to the label "Feministic", both were "humanistic". Ibsen has declared in his speech, "I am not a member of the Women's Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making any propaganda. I have been more poet and less social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe. I am not even quite clear to what this women right movement really is. To me it seemed problem of humanity in general" (2006: 93). They considered it to be the humanistic problem in general rather than feministic. Both the writers wrote differently in different cultures with different views and style but the underlying theme is the all the same.

Ibsen's "*A Doll's House*" is a story about a couple Nora Helmer and Torvard Helmer. Nora is portrayed as a responsible housewife who takes care of every little thing and is shown a very "happy housewife". But still by the end of the play, Nora decides to walk out of her marriage, to find herself. Michael Meyer argued that it is not important to see the play from the feministic point of view. A quest for identity can be any individual's choice not especially women. On the other hand, R.K.Narayan's "*A Dark Room*" is also a story about a couple Savitri, a submissive housewife, who is married to Ramani. She is portrayed as a typical housewife of India of those times, dominated and neglected by her husband. But in the end she also like Nora decides to walk out of her marriage, when she finds out that her husband was in an extra marital affair. She

decides to commit suicide but fails and then decides to leave her husband's house.

Nora, a "happy housewife", whose happiness was not real, played her role and performed her duties for her husband but finds herself trapped in a cage. She feels that she is not free and independent. Betty Friedan says that a "happy housewife is a myth" that traps women as helpless prisoners in a "comfortable concentration camps" that uses "the pretty lie of the feminine mystique" to enact a denigration into "genteel nothingness" (245; 180; 89). Friedan by the use of powerful language denies marriage as the bright colors of marriage are like the rainbow which is only for a short duration.

Both the characters, Nora and Savitri are living happily in their husband's homes, in the service of their husband and children. They perceived marriage as the safe cocoon, in which they will be safe financially, physically and mentally. But the moment a new realization comes, they turn into completely different human beings. They change into revolting personalities and stand up for their rights. On one hand, Nora revolts strongly against her husband and succeed, Savitri also revolts but returns defeated. Though both the stories are similar in themes but still there's a slight margin between the two which separates them. Nora husbands assigns all the duties to her except the money matters because he knew that Nora is a spendthrift and will waste money. Torvard Helmer is a strict person but loves Nora deeply. He is well aware of the fact about Nora's help in the household and loves her ardently. Though she is happy in her nest, the problem in their case is that he treats Nora as his own property or as a doll. On the other hand, Savitri, a pure Indian wife, completely in service of her arrogant husband, who doesn't treat her well and considers her to be inferior to him. Savitri was like a slave to her husband. No kind of freedom was given to her, even which vegetable will be cooked; this was also decided by her husband. When she finds out from her neighbor that her husband was

having an affair in his office, she stands defiantly in front of him and boldly threatens to leave him.

In "*A Doll's House*" Nora invokes legal offence which she has done to save Helmer from illness. She believes that he would save her from it. But Helmer considers it as his disgrace and he blames her of deceit, he orders her to keep her children away from her or leave the house. Nora who is expecting support from him is shocked and comes out of the faith that Helmer loves her and would sacrifice for her sake as she has done. Savitri is shocked too when her husband doesn't tries to stop her and not even feels guilty. During this time, both the protagonists take the decision of walking out of their marriages and from the complex web of relationships and domesticity, in order to search their own identity. Nora succeeds as she is more confident than Savitri and is modern day woman. Though she decides to walk out, she is also aware of her duties as a mother. Before leaving she arranges everything for her children and then tells her decision to Helmer. Helmer tries to stop her, as he was still worried about his fake prestige in society. But Nora leaves and never returns. But in "*A Dark Room*" Savitri also leaves her house, but her husband doesn't stops her because he was well aware that she was atypical Indian women who doesn't know how to earn and take care of herself in the outer world. He knew that Savitri will come back and pays no heed to her decision. And Savitri's husband was right; Savitri left her house but soon returns back in the same cage. But both the heroines share a common spark that arouses the defiant nature in them. They are at the same level when they understand the truth and start the struggle. In their quarrel, Nora tells boldly to Helmer, "I believe that before all else, I am a human being just as much as you are-or at least I should try and become one."(1983:84). In their quarrel at midnight Savitri reacts in the same words, "I am a human being. You men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you feel like hugging and slaves at other time" (1960:58).

Thus while concluding it can be said we agree with critic Germaine Greer, according to whom the housewife is not more than a “permanent employee” whose life is “not real”: it is “anachronistic”, “thwarting” and plainly pointless as it “has no results”, “it simply has to be done again” (272; 312). Greer condemns the life of a full-time housewife as one of a servant, who works from day to night without any wages, turning women into “the most oppressed class of life-contracted unpaid workers, for whom slaves is not too melodramatic a description” (369). Here the “feminist anti-thesis” is presented, that applies an oppressor/oppressed model, according to which “women are the done to, not the doers” (22). The second wave feminists have always been very critical about the domestic women. The labels like slaves, prisoners, schizophrenics, or dehumanizing, robots have been given to housewives by these second wave feminist critics. But media played a very important role in the construction and marketing of female subjectivities and it has urged women to leave behind their “old” self and change into the “new woman” of the moment. Feminism helped women to expand their choices and encouraged them not to bind themselves only to the traditional roles of a wife and mother. And it was only through feminism that women could find a safe escape from the web of domesticity but not by avoiding those roles but by finding a via media and living happily in their lives.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Freiden, Betty. 1963. *The Feminine Mystique*. Norton. Press  
McFarlane, James (Ed.).1961.*Ibsen: Plays A Doll's House* New  
Delhi: Oxford U Press.  
Narayan, R. K.1956. *The Dark Room*.Chennai: Indian Thought  
Publications.