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## Portrayal of ‘New Woman’ with Special Reference to Henrik Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House* and Vijay Tendulkar’s *Kamala*

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### Abstract:

*The concept of ‘New Woman’ is a 20<sup>th</sup> century European phenomena. As a feminist ideal, it is associated with plays such as Henrik Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House* and G.B. Shaw’s *Candida* which has exercised a profound influence on the world of literature. Society has realised that nurturing the new woman is essential for improving our civilisation. In denying freedom to a woman, society will be unwittingly jeopardising its own prospects for a better social order. The manuscript notes of Ibsen’s *Ghosts* shows to us the extent and the nature of Ibsen’s concern for women. “These women of the present day, ill-used as daughters, as sisters, as wives, not educated according to their gifts, prevented from following their inclinations, deprived of their inheritance, embittered in temper – it is these who furnish the mothers of the new generation – what is the result?” This passage clearly indicates that Ibsen wanted emancipation for women since he was convinced that a liberated woman is the only hope for the redemption of future generations. However, the deplorable condition of women is being increasingly discussed in literary works with a view to get rid of the discrimination against them. Both Henrik Ibsen and Vijay Tendulkar have used their plays as a means of bringing the issue of women’s emancipation and liberation to the forefront. Like Ibsen’s*

*play The Doll's House, Tendulkar's Kamala also champions the cause of equality for women.*

*Both these plays comment on women's status through an exploration of their marital relationships. The present paper attempts to make a comparative study of the portrayal of 'New Woman' in Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* and Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala*.*

**Key words:** Vijay Tendulkar, Henrik Ibsen, Krogstad

## **INTRODUCTION:**

*A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen highlights the problems and ideas of contemporary society that is centered around the life of a typical Norwegian household in the Victorian era, focusing on the trials and tribulations that face Nora Helmer in this patriarchal society. A master of realism, Ibsen exposed hidden realities which were hard to digest for his contemporaries. *A Doll's House* explores not only the status of women, but how they are victims of social forces to the extent that they are left with the role of a "doll-wife". It uncovers a shocking secret: some dolls don't get to play the roles they really want. Ibsen's Nora Helmer is a doll trapped in her house, a condition underscored by the fact that all the play's action takes place in her own living room. Repressed by a dominated, authoritative and autocratic husband who expects her to fulfill her wifely and motherly roles under strict guidelines of morality and appearance, Nora discovers she has a will of her own. Ultimately, Nora realises there is only one path that leads to her true identity, and that path begins outside the doll house.

As the curtain opens to the first act, we are introduced to Nora as an "extravagant little person", a "sweet little spendthrift"; giving the audience the impression that she will be yet another undeveloped female character as seen in previous traditional tragedies. While chastising her for unnecessary expenses, he says:

'You always find some new way of wheedling money out of me, and, as soon as you have got it, it seems to melt in your hands. You never know where it has gone.' (Ibsen 5). The cap on Nora's prodigality and spendthriftiness further proves that Torvald has a lot of rules and ideals for her, rules which she must conform to what a wife should do. For Torvald, Nora is unfit to understand the worldly concerns of finance and does not have equal access to the family money. However, the tale illustrates women in the late nineteenth century Norway – and many other European countries – who were not expected to work and denied economic independence.

Besides this, Torvald has the habit of addressing Nora with terms of endearment such as "my sweet little skylark", "my little squirrel", "sweet tooth", "little featherhead" and an "obstinate little person" etc. According to Michael Meyer, by addressing Nora with such sickeningly syrupy pet names, Torvald degrades her into feeling as though she has no important purpose in life but to please him. (Meyer 1628). Torvald's use of such demeaning language and behavior shows that even after eight years of marriage, he underestimates and neglects and ignores her capabilities to the extent that it is questionable whether he knows her at all. To quote Torvald: "[walking up and down] " Oh, what a terrible awakening this is. All these eight years this woman who was my pride and joy....A hypocrite, a liar, worse than that, a criminal! Oh, how utterly squalid it all is!Ugh!Ugh!..." (2008,p.77). Thus this sort of possessiveness and over-protectiveness makes her burst out in anger. In resentment she says: "What I mean is: I passed out of Daddy's hands into yours. You arranged everything to your tastes, and I acquired the same tastes. Or I pretended to...You and Daddy did me a great wrong. It's your fault that I've never made anything of my life." (2008, p 82)

That Torvald is a domineering and authoritarian husband, is evident from Nora when she says to him:

"No, just gay. And you've always been so kind to me. But our house has never been anything but a play-room. I have been your doll wife, just as at home I was Daddy's doll child. And the children in turn have been my dolls. I thought it was fun when you came and played with me, just as they thought it was fun when I went and played with them. That's been our marriage, Torvald" (2008, p. 83)

In yet another instance of subservient position of women, Nora is reduced to a possession and property, not as a partner. As the story progresses, eight years ago, Torvald had fallen gravely ill. The doctors had asked Nora to take him to a warmer place somewhere in South to save his life. Nora decided to conceal this matter from Torvald and manage this trip on her own. She took a loan from Mr. Krogstad for these expenses without the consent of her husband. She had to forge her father's signature on the bond of surety as he was also very ill at that time. Though she procures the fund illegally, she does it for the sake of her husband's well-being. But according to Torvald, this is illegal; an offence and crime in the eyes of law and this dishonesty makes him a moral coward guilty of lies and pretence. As a guardian of societal standards, Torvald values social respectability and honour above all else. Honour is of overwhelming importance to Torvald; it is what motivates his behavior. It is so important for him that he can only focus on how society will react to his family's shame; he simply can not conceive of anyone placing love before honour. Means, he has a public persona to maintain and he views his marriage as an element of public need. So as a custodian of societal mores, he desires Nora to be his ideal wife. Moreover, Torvald sees a woman who is under control; he defines her every behaviour and establishes rules that govern everything from what she eats to what she buys. In this case if Nora's failing threatens to become public knowledge, this indicates to him an inability to control his wife. Bjorn Hemmer asserts in his essay *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen* that in the hundred years since

the French Revolution economic power had replaced the quest for individuality and a married woman had the least amount of economic power. Power resides with the establishment and a banker and lawyer, Torvald clearly represents the establishment. Hemmer further goes on saying that Indeed, Torvald exemplifies this kind of community. Of this society, Hemmer noted: "The people who live in such a society know the weight of 'public opinion' and of all those agencies which keep watch over society's 'law and order': the norms, the conventions and the traditions which in essence belong to the past but which continue into the present and there thwart individual liberty in a variety of ways." It is the weight of public opinion that Torvald cannot defy. And it is the weight of public opinion that condemns the Helmer's marriage. It is because Torvald views his public persona as more important than his private, he is unable to understand or appreciate the suffering of his wife. His reaction to the threat of public exposure is centered on himself. It is his social stature, his professional image, and not his private life which concern him most.

Susanna Rustin aptly comments that Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* shines a very harsh light on the messy heart of relationships and how difficult it can be to be honest with another human being even if you love them. (Rustin)

The heavy war of words between her and her husband, led Nora to a severe psychological conflict. When Anne, the nurse, tells Nora that her children are eagerly seeking her company, she replies: 'No, no, no! Don't let them come to me! You stay with them, Anne. ... Deprive my little children? Poison my home?' (Ibsen 32) Nora feels that she is not a good influence for her children and begins to avoid them. Hence, she declares: If I'm ever to reach any understanding of myself and the things around me, I must learn to stand alone. That's why I can't stay here with you any longer (2008, p. 83).

With the unfolding of the play it is seen that Nora gets a rude shock when Torvald reads Krogstad's first letter. The hollowness of his morals and his extreme self-centredness comes out through his reaction. He blames Nora for her act of dishonesty via forgery and does not take into account her reasons for doing it. He shows readiness to bow down to Krogstad's demands in order to protect his reputation. He declares that his relationship with Nora will not be the same again. Then he reads Krogstad's second letter and declares that everything is all-right. Now he offers to forgive Nora. Thus he reveals himself to be a self-conceited moralist. Nora clearly realises the hollowness of his love for her and declares that she is leaving him to live life on her own terms. She says: "I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are – or at least I'm going to try to be. I know most people agree with you, Torvald, and that's also what it says in books. But I'm not content any more with what most people say, or with what it says in books. I have to think things out for myself, and get things clear". (2008, p.84). Such an action on the part of a married woman and that too, a mother of three children, was unthinkable in those days. According to Hemmer, when Nora rejects her marriage, she is also rejecting bourgeois middleclass values that the society mandates. By such extreme steps, Nora debunks the deception – the cornerstone of the Victorians – and façade of individuality that buried in the Victorian ideal of economics. In this embracing of uncertainty rather than the economic guarantee of her husband's protection, Nora represents the individuality, who, Hemmer asserted, Ibsen wanted to make the sustaining element in society who would dethrone the convention-ridden family as the central institution of society. While pointing out the far-reaching influence of Nora's action on social life, G.B. Shaw writes: 'Nora's revolt is the end of a chapter of human history. The slam of the door behind her is more momentous than the cannon of Waterloo or Sedan.' (Shaw 259)

Vijay Tendulkar's plays written in the second half of twentieth century also show the concept of 'New Woman' as he has acknowledged the influence of western playwrights such as Ibsen and Shaw on him. His play 'Kamala' (translated into English by Priya Adarkar) reveals his keen insight into the pitiable status of women in the male dominated urban middle class society. The author was inspired in writing this play by a real life incident by a journalist who actually bought a woman from rural flesh market. Through the character of Sarita, Jaisingh's wife, in his play *Kamala*, Tendulkar has given an interesting picture of a modern Indian woman who is caught between the opposite pulls of tradition and modernity. Though Sarita is an educated urban lady, she is treated with scant respect by her husband, Jaisingh. Moreover, Sarita is not even aware of the slave-like existence to which Jaisingh has reduced her. While Jaisingh remains absent from home for long periods, she looks after everything dutifully. She does everything that is possible to please Jaisingh.

Jaisingh has bought Kamala, a tribal woman, for two hundred and fifty rupees to prove that human trafficking exists. On the surface Jaisingh is fighting for the cause of the poor and the down trodden. In reality, he just wants to use this incident to get publicity and promotion. When she sees Jaisingh using Kamala, whom he has bought to prove the prevalence of flesh-trade, as a commodity, her eyes are opened. She understands Jaisingh's real attitude of looking at her as only an object of enjoyment and as a caretaker of the house. Shailaja Wadikar observes that Sarita realises that she is bound to her husband in the wedlock to slave for him permanently after the entry of Kamala in her house. (Wadikar 77) Sarita decides to change her condition and starts asserting her individuality. She objects to Jaisingh's decision to send Kamala to an orphanage. She refuses to accompany him to a party. She is so angry and frustrated because of her husband's behaviour that she thinks of arranging a press conference to expose Jaisingh in front of

the world. She even refuses to submit to Jaisingh's desire for physical intimacy.

Sarita's rebellion, however, is short-lived. She comes to know that Jaisingh has been sacked by his employer. Seeing that Jaisingh is feeling disgruntled at the way he has been treated by his employer, Sarita postpones her rebellion. Thus Tendulkar has portrayed Sarita as a modern woman who can probe her inner mind, desires and ambitions. She is mentally prepared for the struggle with society to assert her self identity. But she is also, in the words of Shanta Gokhale, a compassionate human being who defers her rebellion against her husband as he is in an acute need of her moral support. (Gokhale 42) Sarita is a changed personality at the end of the play. She has become conscious of her identity and is determined to change her life in future.

Kamala innocently asks her how much Jaisingh has paid to buy Sarita. This question makes Sarita realise that her own condition is no better than Kamala's. Jain, Jaisingh's fellow journalist, is also aware of Sarita's exploitation at the hands of her husband. He says to Sarita:

'This warrior against exploitation in the country is exploiting you. He's made a drudge out of a horse-riding independent girl from a princely house. ... Shame on you! Hero of anti-exploitation campaigns makes slave of wife!' (Tendulkar 17)

Arundhati Banerjee aptly comments:

'Like Kamala, Sarita is also an object in Jadhav's life, an object that provides physical enjoyment, social companionship and domestic comfort. Kamala's entry into the household reveals to Sarita the selfish hypocrisy of her husband and the insignificance of her own existence.' (Banerjee 581)

While talking to Kakasaheb, she refers to Jaisingh sarcastically as the 'gentleman' and suggests that she will bear the fact of her slavery in front of the world in a press conference. She will make it public that though she is a wife, she is treated no better



than a domestic slave. Shibu Simon writes: 'Sarita, like 'Nora' in Ibsen's 'A Doll's House', has thus undergone a sea-change and is now entirely an independent and assertive woman who has finally discovered her real identity.' (Simon 190) On being questioned by Kakasaheb regarding her submissive attitude in the last ten years of her married life, Sarita replies:

'Kamala showed me everything. Because of her, I suddenly saw things clearly. I saw that the man I thought my partner was the master of a slave. I have no rights at all in this house. Because I'm a slave. (Tendulkar 46)

Sarita gives up her rebellion at the end of the play. However, she does not lose her self belief and conviction. She tells Kakasaheb: 'a day will come, Kakasaheb, when I will stop being a slave. I'll no longer be an object to be used and thrown away. I'll do what I wish, and no one will rule over me.' (Tendulkar 52) The quiet determination in these words suggests that she has not given up her struggle for identity. As Sarita herself is a sufferer, she understands the agony that Jaisingh is going through when he is dismissed from his job.

A comparative study of Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* and Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* shows that Nora and Sarita, women belonging to nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively, have both been portrayed as victims of male domination and wake up to a sense of duty towards themselves. Whereas Nora frees herself from her husband's control at the risk of breaking her marriage, Sarita chooses to save her marriage. Sarita has realised the bitter reality of her actual condition in her husband's house. It is not her submissiveness but sympathy for Jaisingh who is on the verge of mental breakdown. Like Nora, she has also converted into a thinking mature woman. Ibsen's *The Doll's House* and Tendulkar's *Kamala* deal with women's place in home and show that not much has changed with the passage of time. Both Ibsen and Tendulkar were not self-declared advocates of feminism and

looked at the problems of their heroines from the point of view of their belief in human freedom. Both have shown an unorthodox frame of mind and a genuine interest in women's freedom while dealing with the plight of women in different societies and in different contexts. Both the heroines advocate the prevalent notion of feminism or the insufferable domination of men in a modernist world of 20th century as well as emphasises on the absolute right of a person as an individual. Moreover, both the plays gave women a voice, a chance to stand up for themselves no matter the cost and most modern women would agree. It doesn't matter the woman is single or married, daughter or wife. It emphasizes freedom from multiple restricting rules of the traditional world to find herself in the modern world. She is to be treated respectfully and equally as a separate human entity like man. The respect not given to woman will turn in outbreak of her emotions. She will step out to search her place in home. If she is provided with due respect as an individual not even single woman of even modern world will leave her home. If the deeper emotions of the woman are recognised by the man, she will strive to save her family at the risk of own life. But, when the same man is to treat her like helpless and dependent creature on him, she will certainly try to search her own self without caring the man and the family. Both these playwrights raise questions without answering them and only try to make us aware of the problem. Indeed, they have been freed through self actualisation and they are the epitome of modern women. This realisation and desire to leave the situations are what make these feminist plays.

Thus *A Doll's House* is out and out a feminist play which supports economic reform that would protect women's property. And Nora is perfect Ibsenian image of woman who is arguing for social justice. In her essay "The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen", Gail Finney asserts that Nora, a strong-willed heroine, provided a model for the sexual equality that necessitates fundamental changes in the structure of society. Finney

maintained that Nora, the protagonist, opened a way to the turn-of the century “women’s movement”; she opens a door into the hidden world of the ideal Victorian marriage. She sounds a warning bell to wake up women in general to the injustices that had been committed against them. Additionally, in allowing Nora, the right to satisfy her need for an identity separate from that of wife and mother, Ibsen is perceived of the emergence of growing “women question”.

Moreover, as a special genre of literature, *A Doll's House* reveals that Nora demands the right to live fully as a human being. Nora attains her spiritual enlightenment.

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