

Shaping Femininity: Decoding Henrik Ibsen's Nora in Sudha Murty's Shrimati

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Abstract

Man-Woman relationships revolving around the themes of romance and friendship, possessiveness and jealousy, understandings and misunderstandings have fascinated writers across the globe from time immemorial. The notions of patriarchy have profoundly influenced the writers in the portrayal of their characters. Nevertheless, there are writers who preferred to choose the paths untrodden. Henrik Johan Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright of the late nineteenth century, could successfully create a powerful character in Nora Helmer, the female protagonist in his play, "A Doll's House". Nora is a woman who is denied of any self-fulfilment in a male-dominated marriage. The play created great sensation due to its unconventional ending. Transcending across the borders and boundaries of age and of nation, the storyline remains unchanging even in the present century. Sudha Murty, the new millennium writer in India presents an equally strong character, Shrimati Deshpande in her novel "Gently Falls the Bakula". Shrimati becomes disillusioned and dissatisfied with her supercilious husband and hence emerges out to arrive at an appropriate decision. Both Nora and Shrimati shatter the patriarchal hegemony and raise a voice of protest against male dominance.

Keywords: patriarchy, self-fulfilment, male-dominated, unconventional, hegemony

Introduction

The extensive images of womanhood projected through literature, cinemas, advertisements and other popular entertainments in general are mostly based on the norms of patriarchy. Women are highly objectified even in their families. They are often under-estimated and considered as the weaker sex. In marriage, a subservient wife is well-appreciated by the society. A wife who questions an unacceptable condition is often disregarded. Although women empowerment and consequent accelerating changes in the condition of women globally are noteworthy, self-assertive women are considered to be unfit for marriage.

Created by Ibsen in the nineteenth century, Nora Helmer has become an iconic character for women's liberation and self-identity. The depiction of the detailed evolution of Nora could be possible when inspired from a real-life figure named Laura Kieler (maiden name Laura Smith Petersen). The actual events that happened between Laura and her husband Victor contributed to the development of the plot in the play which indirectly throws light to the deplorable status of married women in their own families. When Sudha Murty dedicates her novel "Gently Falls the Bakula", "To all women who allowed family commitments and responsibilities to overpower their own aspirations" she reinforces that the situations confronted by her protagonist Shrimati are similar to those of many contemporary Indian wives.

Discussion

Henrik Johan Ibsen (20 March 1828 – 23 May 1906) was a major playwright and theatre director from Norway predominantly responsible for the emergence of modern realistic drama. He is profoundly acclaimed as the "father of modern drama." He rejected some of the literary conventions like formal plot construction together with happy ending and introduced intensely disturbing storylines in his plays. Ibsen is widely regarded as the greatest of Norwegian authors and commemorated as a national icon by the people of Norway. His masterworks include "Brand", "Peer Gynt", "Emperor and Galilean", "A Doll's House", "Hedda Gabler", "Ghosts", "The Wild Duck", "When We Dead Awaken" and "The Master Builder". Being one of the eminent and influential playwrights of all time, Ibsen has globally become one of the most frequently performed dramatist after Shakespeare.

Sudha Murty (born 19 August 1951) is one of the prominent women writers in India who pens down in English as well as in Kannada. Apart from novels, she has written technical books and travelogues. She also has to her credit a collection of short stories and other non-fiction pieces, and a few books for children. Her books have been translated into several Indian languages. Hailing from Shiggaon in North Karnataka, Sudha Murty did M. Tech in Computer Science from Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. Being the first woman engineer in TELCO, she presently serves as the chairperson of Infosys Foundation. She has been honoured with the 'Padma Shri' award by the Government of India and the R. K. Narayan award for literature, both in the year 2006. Later, she received the Attimabbe Award from the Government of Karnataka for excellence in Kannada literature in 2011. She unfailingly proves herself as a promising writer, a philanthropist and a welfare worker.

Written in 1879, "A Doll's House" is a masterpiece of Henrik Ibsen in which he depicts how his female protagonist gets transformed from a submissive wife to a courageous independent woman. The play in three acts presents Nora, a young mother of three, who is sincere and obedient to her husband in the first act; desperate and desolate in the second; and awakened and determined in the third. Ibsen introduced a deeply troubling storyline as well as an unconventional ending in "A Doll's House". The play had a huge impact creating commotion not only in Norway, but also in Europe, and all through the Atlantic in America. UNESCO has preserved Ibsen's autographed manuscripts of "A Doll's House" on the Memory of the World Register in 2001, acknowledging their historical value. During the centennial year of Ibsen's death in 2006, "A Doll's House" received the recognition as the world's most performed play.

At the outset of the play, Nora is a merry wife who leaves everything at the disposal of her husband-Torvald Helmer. She is highly elated at her husband's new position as the Manager of the Joint Stock Bank. The conversation that happens between Torvald and Nora in the opening scene of "A Doll's House" is a clear indication that the social brainwashing on gender roles is evidently reflected in the family. Nora buys a sword and a horse as Christmas gifts for her sons and a doll for her daughter. Perhaps, her father at first and her husband at present treats Nora like a doll. She becomes instrumental in treating her daughter too like a doll. Torvald's expression of love towards his wife by calling some animal nicknames like "my lark", "my little skylark" and "my squirrel" brings out an element of dehumanisation to some extent. It seems Torvald calls her actual name only when he scolds her. Torvald blames Nora for her mismanagement of money insisting the notion that women are inferior in financial matters. He is prejudiced about woman's money management skills.

Mrs Linden, a widow who is Nora's schoolmate approaches her in search of a job. When Nora request Torvald to find Mrs Linden a job, Torvald instantly assumes that Mrs Linden is a widow. He is gender biased regarding a woman's role in the society. Torvald believes that married women should engage in

household duties and rely on their husbands to meet up their day- to-day requirements. As a matter of fact, he is delighted to take the whole control of the family making his wife dependent on him. Anyhow, Torvald is impressed and offers her a job at his bank where he plans to replace Krogstad with Mrs Linden. Dr Rank, their family friend too opines that Krogstad is corrupt and was caught up in a scandal a few years ago. In her conversation with Mrs Linden, Nora unfolds the way she struggled hard by doing tasks like sewing and crocheting to raise some money to support Torvald while he fell critically ill during the initial years of their marriage. Nora happily describes how she could save Torvald's life arranging money they needed to stay in Italy for his recovery, as advised by his doctors. Nora does not reveal the source of money to Torvald for the reason that her "man's pride" shall not be hurt. When Mrs Linden is dubious whether it is right, Nora responds, "...how painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly self-reliance to know that he owed anything to me!" (Henrik Ibsen et al. 1932)

The audience understands that Krogstad is the moneylender while he starts blackmailing Nora asking her to influence Torvald to allow him to continue at the bank. A character flaw occurs in Nora's past as she forges her father's signature for availing the loan for Torvald's treatment. In the discussion between Nora and Torvald about Krogstad's, Torvald claims that mothers who lie are mostly to blame for early corruption. This throws light to his belief that parenting is a mother's responsibility. He totally forgets or conveniently ignores the role of a father in the upbringing of a child. When dismissed from the bank, Krogstad writes to Torvald exposing Nora's loan and forgery. An outrageous Torvald accuses Nora of being a hypocrite and a liar. He even warns her that she will not be allowed to raise their children. It is the same Torvald who proclaimed his love for his wife and exclaimed: "Do you know, Nora. I often think some danger might threaten you, that I might risk body and soul, and everything, everything, for your dear sake." (Henrik Ibsen et al.1932). When an opportunity arises to prove his true love, Torvald prioritises his honour and reputation to his love and respect for his wife. He has little intention of sacrificing anything for his wife. He is extremely self-centred and has no concern about his wife's condition. Torvald is not willing to accept or appreciate the sacrifice she has made for him. This shocking revelation discloses the false basis of their marriage. At one point, Nora even thinks of committing suicide to save the family's honour, but the hollowness of Torvald's attitude makes her reconsider the decision. Beyond a doubt, Nora is guilty of forgery. Yet she deserves forgiveness because her intention was noble and selfless. If Torvald does not exercise stereotypical control over his wife, Nora will have gained some confidence to open up her mind to him.

Mrs Linden manages to restore Krogstad to his good nature. Krogstad forgives Nora and returns her contract with the forged signature along with his second letter. A relieved Torvald now dismisses all his insults to Nora and makes attempts to patch up. She develops the confidence that she is able to leave outside the domain drawn by her husband. When Torvald prevents her from leaving and urges her to fulfil her obligations to her husband and children, which he deems sacred duties, Nora points out to him that she also has duties to herself that are equally sacred. She is leaving her children with the same person who brought her up. Notwithstanding their eight years of marriage, Nora is disillusioned about Torvald and hence decides to leave him. At the end of the play, she walks out of the doll's house slamming the door behind. The whole action of the play takes place during the Christmas season. The audience understand that it is a preparatory time for the upcoming new year. In Act One, we see an excited Nora about her husband's new position at the bank which will be in effect in the new year. Ironically, in the final Act, Nora has begun her journey towards an independent life and it will be a new beginning for her in the New Year.

In the preface of “Gently Falls the Bakula”, Murty believes that the story is relatable and could occur anywhere in the country, even today. The writer becomes successful in penetrating deep into the feminine psyche of an ordinary married woman who turns out to be helpless and depressed in a male-subjugated society. The novel depicts the story of Shrikant and Shrimati whose ten years of marriage becomes futile due to conflicting ideologies, lack of proper communication and understanding. Both the husband and wife are acquaintances from their childhood days; they are classmates and neighbours. The Bakula tree stands in between their houses and their love keeps blooming like the Bakula flowers. They keep their love for each other away from the eyes of their family members as there is bitter rivalry existing between their families. Both are brilliant in studies. After their schooling, Shrimati prefers to join an Arts College nearby to study History, while Shrikant goes to Science College and later joins for Computer Science in IIT Bombay. They were connected through letters where Shrimati kept a Bakula flower every time. Soon, the Bakula becomes a symbol of Shrimati for him, in effect a personification of her.

While doing MA History in Karnataka University, Shrimati meets Professor Collins who suggests her to do research in the U.S. She declines the offer or else she will not be able to stay with Shrikant after getting married. This is the first remarkable sacrifice Shrimati takes to materialise their marriage. Shrikant takes up a job in an IT company in Bombay. They soon get married and move to Bombay. Shrimati’s dream of continuing her studies become jeopardized when she starts working to repay the loan which her mother-in law took for Shrikant’s studies. Shrikant successfully climbs the corporate ladder in no time. Shrimati eventually takes up the role of his intelligent but submissive personal assistant. In his ambitious pursuit, Shrikant denies satisfying his wife’s motherly instinct; his mother and sister consider her as barren. Their material well-being improves but the harmony of their relationship and the mental well-being deteriorates drastically. Both husband and wife get very feeble time to be together. Shrimati must take up the role of a pleasing hostess to his official and personal friends although she feels uncomfortable. All those were connections based on business and profit, and Shrimati feels indifferent to those fake relationships. Yet she believes that it is her duty to support her husband in all possible ways. When she falls ill and gets hospitalised, a private nurse is arranged for her care. Shrikant is abroad on a business tour and hence Shrimati does not intimate about her hospitalisation as she does not want to disturb him. She proves to be highly considerate and caring about her husband.

All those who know her appreciate her skill and courage. Ravi Patil, their mutual friend writes to Shrikant to congratulate him on his achievement and praises Shrimati for all her support to her husband. In the letter he acknowledges Shrimati as the other hand of Shrikant who brings him success. He mentions that Shrimati has been unassuming, undemanding and totally submissive to her husband’s needs and his accomplishments. Harish, Shrikant’s IT colleague and friend compares her to a torchbearer who removes all hurdles on the path to success for her husband. To the contrary, no word or deed of acknowledgement comes from her husband’s side. Vandana feels pity for Shrimati’s predicament. She admits that Shrimati had a handsome young husband who is extremely ambitious and travels throughout the year. In fact, she is aware of the indifference shown by Shrimati’s in-laws and regrets that she does not even have a child to live with. Vandana adds that her own mother often envies Shrimati’s life, although Vandana herself never feels that way. Maruthi, their driver thinks that Shrikant’s behaviour resembled his drunkard father who never bothered about others. Shrikant’s concern was name, fame, position and status.

Gangakka, Shrikant's mother was never a kind mother-in-law. She believes that Shrimati is her son's bad luck. Rama, Shrikant's sister never lose any opportunity to add fuel to the fire. Gangakka blames Kamala, Shrimati's mother for her bad upbringing. Shrikant values his mother's sacrifices for him. He turns to be blind towards the countless sacrifices, whether big or small, Shrimati makes for him in their day-to-day life. Life gets suffocating for Shrimati with an extremely busy husband who seldom bothers about the existence of an individual being in his wife. Shrimati's association with Prof Collins helps her to beget a scholarship to pursue her doctoral studies in History in the US. This opening in fact helps her to vent out her otherwise bottled-up aspirations. She is never hesitant to take up this opportunity like that of a previous occasion. Her ten years of marriage taught her many new lessons. She finds no regret in leaving her husband. She exhorts to Shrikant: "You give appointments to everybody, but you don't have any time for me. Don't I deserve one? Don't you have any duty towards me?" (Sudha Murty 2008)

While juxtaposing Nora and Shrimati, we find Nora being brought up by her father as a dependent daughter whose potential of becoming self-reliant is absolutely smothered. Her husband takes up the role of her father figure who controls her, pampers her, scolds her and provides for her. Nora becomes a stereotypical wife whose world is limited to her husband and her three children. On the other hand, Shrimati is presented as an intelligent and educated young woman. Shrimati grows up with a jobless father and a timid loving mother. Contrary to their family's tradition, Kamala, Shrimati's mother takes up a teaching job. The self-sustaining nature of her mother might have influenced Shrimati. Nonetheless, Shrimati makes countless sacrifices for the successful journey of Shrikant, to which he turns deaf and blind, taking everything for granted. The greatest risk that Nora takes for the well-being of her husband is fiercely castigated and ruthlessly humiliated by her own Torvald. Nora receives a comic relief when she is in the presence of her children. This advantage is bitterly denied for Shrimati. When Shrikant denies her idea of having children and rejects her request for an adoption, she is dreadfully shattered. Ending up a marital relationship and walking away from it is not uncommon in the present era but leaving one's own children was the most controversial act Nora did. Torvald fails to recognise his wife as a person. Likewise, Shrikant too neglects the presence of a human being in his wife. Shrimati's words resounding words are remarkable here: "You never think of me as a human being or what hurts me and what makes me happy! You treat me like a machine." (Sudha Murty 2008). While Shrimati is treated as a machine that assists Shrikant in his both professional and personal matters, Nora is a beautiful possession, a doll or a toy to play with according to Torvald's mood swings.

Conclusion

The problems of women are universal. We boast ourselves that we have come a long way in the journey of women liberation and that cannot be denied altogether. Women have been struggling hard over centuries to establish a meaning and identity for their existence. The 21st century women are educated, and education brings self-awareness and empowerment. Yet a re-examination on the status of women will pave the way to countless examples around us who struggle to regain their individuality as well as self-sufficiency both in their families and in the society, they belong to. Time and again, a woman sacrifices her aspirations, her ambitions, and her dignity for the welfare of her family. These sacrifices are neither acknowledged nor appreciated in the family and everything is taken for granted. When Nora banged the door, the thudding sound created a huge impact not only on the Norwegian society but also on the whole of Europe. In fact, it is doubtless that Murty's Shrimati is the new Nora emerging out to break the boundaries enforced upon every woman by the male-dominated society.

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