

# The Marionette's Secret: Seeking the Self Amidst the Tangled Loom of Expectations in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the difference between societal expectations and self-identity in Henrik Ibsen's realistic play *A Doll's House*, focusing on the feminist character Nora Helmer's journey toward self-realisation. The study examines how gender discrimination, family politics, and societal expectations entrap women within tangled societal norms. This paper reveals how Nora's self-awakening challenges the deterministic roles assigned to her and underscores Ibsen's critique of 19th-century social norms. This work argues that *A Doll's House* remains a revolutionary exploration of autonomy and the silent struggle to assert the self in a world governed by secrets of expectation. This study uses a qualitative literary method. It is focusing on close reading of Henrik Ibsen's literary text *A Doll's House*. The research draws upon textual analysis: examining language, dialogue, and symbols.

**Keywords:** Gender, Social Expectation, Marionette, Self-Realisation, Autonomy.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Shirley Chisholm says that "the emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says, 'It's a girl'" (Chisholm 21). Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is a powerful realistic play of the social expectations that entrap individuals, particularly women, within the domestic framework of 19th-century society. This paper explores how the feminist protagonist Nora, is controlled in a web of expectations that represent her identity and relationships, ultimately compelling her to the false foundations of personal life. The study reveals how Ibsen uses Nora's journey to expose the deep psychological and emotional toll of conforming to oppressive expectations. Through a close textual analysis, the study examines how Nora's journey from obedience to self-realisation symbolises a rebellion against the oppressive social structures in modern society.

*A Doll's House* is a feministic realist play. It explores themes of gender discrimination, freedom, and societal expectations in modern society. This realistic work remains a powerful critique of social expectations on women. This literary art centers on Nora Helmer's lifestyle. Nora's life is shaped by the expectations of obedience, sacrifice, and

emotional dependence. She reveals the deep psychological and emotional problems. The focus of this paper, The Marionette's Secret: Seeking the Self Amidst the Tangled Loom of Expectations in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is to give a realistic view of expectations on women. This paper explores the factors behind Nora's marionette's secret. The purpose of this research paper is to identify the reasons for the pressure of social expectations in the materialistic modern Era. This play has a great literary contribution to feminist literary history. This literary art challenges gender-based discrimination in literature. This art deals with social expectations on women in many dimensions. This realistic narrative explores the suffocating impact of social expectations on women. This remarkable work transforms a submissive wife in to an assertive individual. This research examines the struggle between personal autonomy and social gender roles. This is a powerful play of gender bias within imposed boundaries. This play is identified as Henrik Ibsen's identity play so he is called the Father of Modern Drama. His predominant work introduced a new realistic picture of society. Ibsen's work emphasised psychological struggle, social discrimination, and individual struggle for identity. He is celebrated for his fearless engagement and enduring influence on modern thought and theatrical expression.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Henrik Ibsen's realistic play *A Doll's House* is a pioneering work in modern dramatic-history. This is a significant milestone in the realistic play. This play is explaining a more realistic portrayal of domestic dilemmas and psychological expectations. Ibsen noted gender expectations of his time. The play examines character development, moral integrity, and societal position in modern European drama. Nora's realisation of her suffocating position within her marriage has been extensively studied in modern feminist literary criticism. Critics such as Elaine N. Long and Toril Moi interpret Nora's final decision to depart from her husband and children as a radical act of female emancipation. Her evolution from housewife into an assertive individual traces a powerful resistance to the modern world. Ibsen's portrayal of Nora's awakening is portrayed as both a personal and political revolution in 19th-century European society. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* has the universal theme of self-discovery and self-realisation. Nora's quest for identity is the exploration of existential freedom. Literary theorists have compared Nora's journey with that of other protagonists in modern drama. Ibsen's use of naturalistic dialogue, a tight three-act structure, and confined domestic space enhances the emotional depth of the play. Symbolic elements like the Christmas tree, the tarantella dance, and the door slam are frequently analysed for their deeper meanings. These theatrical devices not only reflect Nora's inner mindset but also heighten the dramatic impact of her transformation. Ibsen's dramatic technique influenced contemporaries like Chekhov and later dramatists such as Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. This realistic play *A Doll's House* continues in a subject of dynamic reinterpretation across cultures and traditions. Recent studies explore its relevance to issues such as legal autonomy, marriage equality, and gender discrimination. Nora's story reflects diverse social struggles. This play remains a powerful text in modern drama. It is also a vital part of on-going discussions about identity, freedom, and societal transformation.

## III. SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS OF GENDER

*A Doll's House* is a groundbreaking feminist play. It expressed oppressive societal expectations on women. Gender based societal expectations are unwritten rule. These expectations are constructed by many aspects of history, culture, literature, institutions and media. It is rooted in traditional and patriarchal norms. Fundamental expectations of women are caregiving goals. The important expectation is to prioritize the needs of others. The expectation to prioritize others can lead to destruction of dream, financial struggles and lack in leadership roles. These gender-based expectation leads to gender inequity..

Henrik Ibsen highlights the gender-based expectations on women in *A Doll's House*. Nora Helmer is characterised as being the perfect wife and dependent on her husband. She fulfills all domestic duties. Ibsen illustrates how Nora is expected to live in the shadow of her husband, without an identity of her own. Ibsen criticises her journey to critique the restrictive nature of gender expectations. He uses Nora to

exemplify the gender bias of society in the modern era. Nora is forced to be cheerful, obedient, dependent, and focused on domestic responsibilities. Her husband, Torvald, treats her like a puppet rather than an equal partner. She is a victim of societal pressure. Her intelligence is an entertainment for a gender-based society. She is a doll in her house. Her realisation leads to her rejection of these genders-based expectations. Her decision to depart husband and children is a dramatic break from the societal expectations. Women have been constructed by many social expectations. Society expects women to prioritise family over personal ambition. This expectation is forcing her to fit into traditional roles. Henrik Ibsen's realistic *A Doll's House* examines the pathetic impact of these expectations through the tragic protagonist of Nora Helmer. Nora's rejection of these expectations is reinforced the gender roles forced upon women.

Nora has a history of victimisation by her own wealthy husband. Early in their marriage, Torvald became very ill and destitute, and he lost his job due to his illness. Nora Helmer was considered a perfect woman. She is described "dud", a "rabbit" for her husband, Torvald, and a beautiful or caring mother for her children. For many years, Nora made sacrifices to save money to repay the loan. She forged her father's signature for save Torvalds's life. This is considered Nora's foremost sacrifices. Nora thought that she was in need of doing something to maintain her husband's affection, she asserted:

- "Yes – sometimes, perhaps. Years from now, when I'm no longer pretty.
- You mustn't laugh! I mean, of course, when Torvald no longer loves me
- as he does now; when it no longer amuses him to see me dance and
- dress up and play the fool for him. Then it might be useful to have something up my sleeve." (Ibsen 40)

## IV. SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS OF MARRIAGE

### ➤ Nora Points out that

"I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are—or at least that I should try to become one. I know the majority thinks you are right, Torvald, and plenty of books agree with you, too. But I can no longer be satisfied with what most people say or with what's written in books. I have to think over things for myself and get to understand them." (Ibsen 104)

Henrik Ibsen critiques the marital expectations on women in his powerful social play *A Doll's House*. Torvald is identified as an authoritative husband, but Nora is an obedient wife. Nora's realisation of her subjugation leads to the emotional depth of the play. It offers a timeless exploration of personal integrity within intimate relationships. In modern society, marital expectations on women create pressure to her entire life. Many social media platforms are also modified this pressure in another dimension. Many pressures are deeply originated in culture, religion, and tradition. Many Women is taking primary responsibility for domestic duties and childcare. Women are typically expected to construct peaceful

life and sacrifice for her entire family. Many women are questioning on traditional way of marital expectations. They expect mutual respect, and economical freedom. Marriage expectations take time and effort. Women are the targets of marriage programs in materialistic modern world. Marriage is a market. Family financial status and health are also closely connected with marriage. Gender roles are constructed in marriage. Women are emotionally trapped in the name of marriage.

## V. SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD

Media executive and philanthropist Oprah Winfrey states that “Biology is the least of what makes someone a mother. Motherhood is about the willingness to sacrifice, to love unconditionally, to nurture, and to give of oneself for the benefit of another” (Winfrey). The present study explores the issue of motherhood through the character Nora. Motherhood has constructed social, cultural, and personal expectations. Mothers are expected to be careers in today’s society. In Ibsen’s play *Nora* is personified as a devoted mother. She loves her children in an unconditional way. She is a selfless mother. Her decision to leave her children is an unexpected one in the world of motherhood. Mothers are always available and self-sacrificing personalities in practical ways. These characteristics are a pressure on mothers. Social media promote an image of the perfect motherhood. Social media creates an unrealistic standard of motherhood. Nora’s motherhood-based expectations create more pressure on her practical life. Her mental health is also affected by these kinds of expectations. The feministic play *A Doll’s House* addresses fundamental questions about motherhood. Nora’s journey reflects the struggle for mothers and mirror to modern motherhood. Nora undergoes a significant self-transformation in her life. She feels pressure to fulfill all her responsibilities. This creates anger, guilt, and unrealistic expectations. She is not emotionally healthy.

As a mother, Nora asserts her perception of her social status as a mother or wife instead of being regarded as an individual human being. She says, “While I was at home with my father, he used to tell me all his opinions, and I held the same opinions. He used to call me his doll-child and played with me as I played with my dolls. Then I came to live in your house” (Ibsen 66).

According to Behnam, human beings in *A Doll’s House* are depicted “as the victim of outside forces as conventions and social rules” (63). Ibsen has emphasised Nora referring to a child. Travallo uses it in the same way Nora’s father did. She is considered a possession and controlled by her entire family like a marionette. So Nora’s marionette’s secret is revealed through the web of social expectations.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Expectations on women shaped by a mix of traditional norms, modern values, cultural and social media influence. Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* is a powerful demonstration of 19th-century social expectations, particularly within marriage and domestic life. Nora is expected to be a doll in her doll in her Doll’s House. In this current society, women are also idealised as self-sacrificing cares, whose value comes from taking care of their husband and children, not from self-satisfaction. They pressure to maintain appearance. They struggle for self-discovery and independence. Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* analyses the tension between social expectation and self-realisation. It exposes the power imbalances within Nora’s marriage. Nora is the decorative object in the play. She experiences internal conflict between her duties as a wife and mother and her desire for personal self-sacrifice. Jennifer Hasen, in his “One is not born a woman,” noted that ‘Beauvoir strongly believed that marriage trapped and stunted women’s intellectual growth and freedom’. She has a history of transformation by the pressure of social expectations. She sacrificed herself for these kinds of expectations. Nora asserts that “I must educate myself; and you can’t help me with that. It’s something I must do by myself, that’s why I’m leaving you ... I must stand on my own feet if I am to find out the truth about myself and life (Ibsen. 67). Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* mirrors the present life of Nora but also influences the future of Nora. She asserts that

- “I have been your doll wife, just as at home I was Daddy’s doll child, and the
- Children then 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 to play with them. That’s been our marriage, Torvald”. (Ibsen 114).
- Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Sheryl Wudunn declares that “Women are not the problem. They’re the solution” (Kristof and WuDunn 8).

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