



## The Concepts of Female Agency and Subjectivity in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*: A Feminist Study

Fatemeh Bagherian Rafsanjani Pour<sup>1</sup>, Neda Fatehi Rad<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD Candidate, Department of English Language, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English Language, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran

<p><b>Abstract:</b> The concept of feminism is a subject of debate within various branches of the humanities, most notably literature. Feminism embodies diverse social norms and cultural expressions which are reflected in literary works. The issue of feminism has been explored through various theoretical frameworks. Luce Irigaray, the notable feminist scholar, suggested different theories toward feminism. Her focus has been on women’s authentic nature, agency, and subjectivity in the face of oppression and a patriarchal society. She argued that individuals should consider themselves independently of their gender and abilities; as these reflect their inherent nature. The current article endeavors to analyze Nora, the leading protagonist in Henrik Ibsen’s <i>A Doll’s House</i>, who is objectified by her husband, Torvald Helmer, and lacks agency in her personal life. Furthermore, Irigaray posited that women should uncover the genuine nature of their relationship to the world. The principal character undergoes various conflicts throughout the play, but ultimately resolves to discover her individualism and disregard the gender discrimination prevalent in the masculine society. The significance of this article lies in its interdisciplinary approach, blending literary analysis with feminist theory to offer a fresh and insightful perspective on a classic literary work. By integrating Irigaray’s feminist theories, the article provides a deeper understanding of the challenges women face in patriarchal societies and their pursuit of authenticity and agency.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Feminism, Female agency, Female subjectivity, Patriarchal society, Women’s authentic nature.</p>	<p><b>Review Paper</b></p> <p><b>*Corresponding Author:</b>  <b>Neda Fatehi Rad</b>        Assistant Professor,        Department of English        Language, Kerman        Branch, Islamic Azad        University, Kerman, Iran</p> <p><b>Article History:</b>          <b>Submit: 29.12.2023</b>            <b>Accepted: 30.01.2024</b>            <b>Published: 10.02.2024</b>  </p>
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### INTRODUCTION

Feminism movement is a socio-political endeavor that advocates for the advancement of women’s rights and the enhancement of their social standing within society. The majority of societies are fundamentally patriarchal, with rules made by men, attitudes expressed by them, and men’s judgments and authorities on women and various societal issues. The context of feminism encompasses diverse opinions that have been articulated by numerous writers and scholars. For many years, the historical documentation of English literature has been restricted to the male perspective, while the female gender was relegated to the status of objects that were only worthy of being observed and imagined. Feminist theory emerged as a means to protect the rights of women within society, as cultural and

structural factors have engendered marked disparities between genders (Chandio, Fatima, & Soomro, 2019).

Currently, there exist certain lacunae that manifest the predicament of resolving feminist quandaries and inquiries in relation to literary works. These gaps are contingent upon divergent literary paradigms. Nevertheless, contemporary scholarship has access to an array of knowledge and source materials that facilitate literary analysis. In addition, the notion of feminism, as a denomination, is a distinctive and arduous one to scrutinize and assess. A cursory overview of major literary theories and critiques during recent years reveals a plethora of attitudes towards the notion of ‘feminism’.

#### Feminism in Theory

In order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding, it is imperative to gain insight into certain

feminist theories espoused by prominent and celebrated feminists. Kate Millett, in her work *Sexual Politics*, declared that both men and women are consciously and unconsciously influenced by the cultural norms and values that have been established by society. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft is commonly acknowledged as one of the initial literary works regarding feminism. Wollstonecraft condensed her arguments into an article and advocated for women's education and liberation from the confines of being mere wives. She made a firm statement emphasizing that women ought to be granted comparable intellectual, social and legal standing as men. Females are required to embrace leadership roles in order to represent their identity and assumed responsibilities in society. It is urgent for women to relinquish patriarchal ideals that have historically cast them as subordinate to men.

*The Subjugation of Women*, an essay by John Stuart Mill, served as a justification for gender discrimination, condemning the opinion that females are considered inherently incapable of undertaking duties equivalent to those of men. Simone de Beauvoir, the distinguished French philosopher, in *The Second Sex*, her seminal work, meticulously scrutinized the themes of feminism and the sentiments of oppression and injustice experienced by feminists. Second movement of feminism was principally preoccupied regarding achieving economic and also social parity. Additionally, the eradication of discrimination and the realization of legal justice were subjects of inquiry (Akter, 2021). Feminist theories exhibit a diversity in terms of age, background, overviews and opinions. Thus, they offer a valuable guide for delving into the layers of literature, enabling us to appraise both the positive and negative perspectives. Consequently, they possess the ability to bridge the literary gaps and present a more expansive range of subject matters.

Irigaray expounded upon the notion that women ought to become cognizant of the authentic essence of their relationship to the world. Women's avoidance of their actual nature has hindered their ability to grasp the fact that they are flawless human beings. In *Breathing with Luce Irigaray*, Lenart Škof and Emily A. Holmes astutely observed that Irigaray's insistence on human beings' inherent connection to the natural world served as a compelling affirmation of the need for human nature to be nurtured and cultivated through cultural means (Lenart & Holmes, 2013). Individuals ought to be considered in terms of their unique perception, irrespective of gender and ability. Such aptitudes serve to showcase their personal disposition, while identities persist to evolve within social and cultural realms. Therefore, an individual's true identity is derived from their innate nature. In accordance with Irigaray's perspective, the emblematic configurations of a patriarchal community and a submissive femininity

bestow upon men exclusive entitlements (Kafshgarkolaie & Kami, 2022).

Irigaray, a prominent feminist critic, espoused the belief in a true nature of womanhood that women should actively seek and promote. This pursuit is crucial as it enables women to enhance their abilities and attain the concept of 'women subjectivity'. Finally, resulting in the acquisition of 'agency' in their private lives. Irigaray's feminist principles and theories hold significant relevance and offer valuable insights into the comprehending of 'feminism'. She has presented diverse viewpoints on feminism and has compared some of them with Sigmund Freud's theories, the pioneer of psychoanalysis and a significant figure in his own right. It can be argued that Irigaray has re-metaphorized the female body to reinterpret the subject as embodied. Besides, Irigaray has endeavored to evoke the 'other woman' - a woman who does not embody the patriarchal femininity of Freudian theory.

#### ***A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen**

*A Doll's House*, authored by Ibsen, presented his initial theatrical production with a female protagonist who challenged the established Victorian conventions. The first publication of this play occurred in 1879, introducing the character of 'Nora', who subsequently becomes Ibsen's most renowned female protagonist. Towards the conclusion of this theatrical production, Nora's metamorphosis signifies the emergence of a generation of modern dramatic female characters, distinct from their Victorian predecessors. Nonetheless, the scholarly investigation concerning this topic reveals that a considerable number of critics tend to disregard Nora's natural progression as a character regarding the context. However, she transforms from a mere doll into an assertive and independent woman. The insufficiency in comprehending Nora's persona often arises from patriarchal situations that dictate an incompatible analysis of the character (Al-Zubaidi, 2022).

Additionally, Ibsen highlights the sacrificial role of women in a masculine society, as demonstrated through the character of Nora who sacrifices and gives up her own desires to save her family. This story effectively showcases the impact of gender discrimination on the protagonist's life, efforts, and decisions. What's more, it also explores the themes of mistaken marriage and fear of losing one's reputation. One of the central themes of this play is the individual's confrontation with society, ultimately leading to Nora's realization and respect for herself as an individual. Conversely, there are scholars who have decried Nora's actions and decisions at the play's conclusion. These scholars argued that women are responsible for the well-being of their families and must comport themselves with prudence and assertiveness in society and culture. Indeed, the critics have proffered a variety of opinions on the play's objective and its climactic resolution.

## DISCUSSION

### Feminist Perspectives of *a Doll's House*

The establishment of the feminist viewpoint aimed to affirm the principle that women hold equivalent entitlements to men in all domains. In the context of the play, Nora's character epitomizes a position of equality between the sexes, whereby both genders are regarded as human beings devoid of any discernible dissimilarities. Moreover, the character of Mrs. Linde is also presented as a representation of the female identity. Her tireless efforts in providing for her family are indicative of her strength and resilience in the face of adversity (Ragavi & English, 2020).

Linde's narrative reveals to us the tragedy that she experienced. In addition, she looked after her two younger siblings and had the responsibility of tending to her ailing mother. Furthermore, she was in love with a gentleman named Nils Krogstad. Nevertheless, as a result of exigent circumstances, Linde was obligated to marry a merchant. As a consequence, she relinquished her romantic relationship. Linde elucidated to Nora that "Mother was still alive then, but she was bedridden and helpless. And I had my two younger brothers to look after. I didn't think I had the right to turn him down." (Ibsen, 1920). In a conversation with Nora, Linde expressed that "Well, I had to manage as best I could. With a little store and a little school and anything else I could think of. The last three years have been one long workday for me, Nora, without any rest." (Ibsen, 1920). Aside from living with her family, she demonstrated a remarkable level of devotion by taking care of her family members to the best of her abilities and maintaining warm relationships with them. This has resulted in a sense of contentment and joy in her life (Uddin & Yasmin, 2021).

Torvald Helmer employs various endearing nicknames to address his wife, such as "my own sweet little songbird" (Ibsen, 1920), "my little lark" (Ibsen, 1920), "my squirrel" (Ibsen, 1920), and "my poor little Nora" (Ibsen, 1920). These names symbolize Helmer's manipulation of Nora, as he employs them to diminish her self-image and induce a sense of inferiority. Within this distorted belief system, Nora resists Helmer's attempts to uncover her past transgressions by telling him, "Let me go. You are not to sacrifice yourself for me. You are not to take the blame." (Ibsen, 1920), while always prioritizing her husband's well-being over her own. In contrast, Helmer demonstrates a lack of reciprocity in his regard for Nora (Batool & Khatoun, 2023). Helmer's propensity towards authoritarianism compelled him to perceive himself as the preeminent figure in the household, with his wife relegated to the role of a passive spectator, obligated to acquiesce to his dictates (Prasetiani, Wuntu, & Lolowang, 2021). Moreover, Nora uneasily announced that "You have never understood me. Great wrong has been done to me, Torvald. First by Daddy and then by you." (Ibsen, 1920).

At the conclusion of the narrative, Nora, a disillusioned wife, faced the arduous trials of affection, trust, and sacrifice subsequent to discovering her husband's response to Krogstad's epistle. Helmer asserted, "You have ruined all my happiness. My whole future—that's what you have destroyed." (Ibsen, 1920) which was a source of significant distress. With the revelation of the secret, Nora's awareness of her marriage and love was aroused. Regarding the conversation between Nora and her husband, she complained about her lacks of agency and authority and expressed that "When I was home with Daddy, he told me all his opinions, and so they became my opinions too. If I disagreed with him I kept it to myself, for he wouldn't have liked that." (Ibsen, 1920). She also added that "He called me his little doll baby, and he played with me the way I played with my dolls. Then I came to your house." (Ibsen, 1920).

A majority of critics concurred with her passive demeanor and subsequent transformation at the end. The play delineates two distinct conflicts: the first being external, with Nora in conflict with an unjust society, and the second being an internal conflict within Nora's heart regarding her existence, life's difficulties, and her resolution. The play manifests a comprehensible irony, which is further accentuated by the drastic change in Torvald's behavior. As he mentioned that "True! Is it true what he writes? Oh my God! No, no—this can't possibly be true." (Ibsen, 1920). Nora truthfully answered that "It is true. I have loved you more than anything else in the whole world." (Ibsen, 1920). However, Torvald angrily responded that "Oh, don't give me any silly excuses." (Ibsen, 1920), "You wretch! What have you done!" (Ibsen, 1920).

After receiving the second letter he declared that "We're saved, Nora! Nobody can do anything to you now." (Ibsen, 1920), "Good God, Nora, these must have been three terrible days for you." (Ibsen, 1920), "We'll just rejoice and tell ourselves it's over, it's all over!" (Ibsen, 1920), "I swear to you, I have forgiven you for everything. Of course I know that what you did was for love of me." (Ibsen, 1920). What's more, this play is believed to perceive Nora as a person who lacks autonomy and a developmental identity. Moreover, the society and the mind accepted women as submissive. She expressed that "But our home has never been more than a playroom. I have been your doll wife here, just the way I used to be Daddy's doll child. And the children have been my dolls" (Ibsen, 1920). She dolefully explained that "I thought it was fun when you played with me, just as they thought it was fun when I played with them. That's been our marriage, Torvald." (Ibsen, 1920).

(Pebruantari, Candraningrum, Setyabudi, & Hum, 2015) conducted a feminist analysis of Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*. Her research, entitled "*Marriage Reflected in Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House Play (1879): A Feminist Approach*", provided

perspectives that corroborated previous theories and evaluations of the play. (Pebruantari *et al.*, 2015) posited that the present play was authored as a portrayal of a society which rebuffed Nora's decision to depart from her household and her family. She vehemently combated against the prevailing patriarchal norms in order to attain parity of status, rights, and active participation, as opposed to being relegated to the limited roles of a mother and wife. Scholars have engaged in discourse on Ibsen's notion that an individual's true contentment and fulfillment can only be achieved by exploring one's own identity and selfhood. Succumbing to a predetermined, artificial existence is likely to result in catastrophic outcomes. The rise of feminism in the 19th century may be regarded as a harbinger of these ideas.

Irigaray elaborated a number of assumptions concerning the work, family, love, and home of females. Additionally, her perspective opposed Freud's contentions of female social isolation and inferiority. The initial portrayal of the female role as contingent within the narrative, foregrounded the societal standing of women in a patriarchal milieu. The entire play strived to question notions regarding gender disparities and sexuality. (Irigaray, 1985) further clarified in her publication about the objectification of women in what is known as marriage. Helmer made a concerted effort to regulate and control his wife's conduct and deeds, with the intention of averting any harm to his assets. As Nora mentioned that "I have earned my keep by doing tricks for you, Torvald. But that's the way you wanted it. You have great sins against me to answer for, Daddy and you. It's your fault that nothing has become of me." (Ibsen, 1920).

According to Freud, who posited that the ego functions as "the representative of the outer world to the id" (Freud, 1989), the ego theory proposes the existence of a continuous self that is shaped by our sensory experiences. It is through the ego that we are connected to the external world, as it is the part of ourselves that observes and comprehends the workings of the world around us. This understanding enables the ego to effectively navigate the world in pursuit of our goals and desires. In essence, the ego is responsible for upholding the reality-principle, whereas the id is solely preoccupied with the pleasure-principle (Freud, 1990). Various critiques of this particular theatrical performance have depicted specific and definitive concepts and analyses. Meanwhile, their synopses and explications are congruent and consistent with regards to this ongoing investigation. One may scrutinize feminism as a prominent aspect of the narrative, encompassing women's societal standing and their entitlements concerning their respective cultures and communities, particularly during the year 1879. Finally, Nora gained the ability to discover her 'ego,' 'self-worth,' and 'self-importance'.

The question of whether a homely setting can warrant her happiness in the new feminist condition, specifically in the world of feminism in the first wave, remains unexplored at this point (Uddin, 2022). Certain scholars have posited the notion that leaving her home can induce solitude and new struggles in a patriarchal society with an unjust situation. The situation which may result in a troublesome adventure for attaining a new identity in a patriarchal association. In conclusion, some scholars explicated the idea of opportunity and reconstruction of the relationship between couples. Therefore, Nora can fulfill her duty as a mother by protecting and rescuing her children.

### Female Agency

In the realm of Irigaray, agency is perceived as the corporeal potentiality of utilizing a political space for alteration. To explicate agency explicitly, it is essential to expound on how individuals can act beyond conformity to the regularities of social authority that establish their subjectivity, and how such transgressive actions can impact their individualism and his/her world. Irigaray's discourse on "intimate politics," unfolds on the intrasubjective and intersubjective levels, illuminates the profound alteration that both genders should undergo to encounter each other in novel ways and establish a more compassionate and cultured society. This stance draws upon the overarching notion that subjectivity and agency are contingent upon the correlation between social power and the realm of signification (Rozmarin, 2013).

The concept of female agency pertains to the capacity of women to make decisions and choices in their personal lives, which was previously restricted. Female agency encompasses both natural agency, where women possess self-confidence and awareness of their privilege, and influential authority, which involves the exercise of determination and the utilization of acquired resources (Qutteina, James-Hawkins, Al-Khelaifi, & Yount, 2019). Naila Kabbeer defined agency as the "ability to define an individual's goals and act on them" (Donald, Koolwal, Annan, Falb, & Goldstein, 2020). Autonomy and negotiating power are two aspects related to agency, as discussed by Donald *et al.*, (2020). In psychological literature, autonomy refers to an individual's ability to take action towards achieving their goals purposes. Moreover, autonomy is individual whereas negotiating power is relative. Therefore, agency and authority are mixture of people's inner ambitions also the capacity to impact humans through their desires.

(Donald *et al.*, 2020) have stated an ideational framework for individuals to adopt agency, consisting of three key elements: firstly, individuals should arrange aims that regulate their desirability; secondly, they should cultivate a sense of urgency and control; and thirdly, they must strive to attain their desires (Putri, 2022). Nora blamed Torvald for ignoring her autonomy which led her to ignore her rights and choices as an

individual. She expressed that “I Mean that I passed from Daddy’s hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your taste, and so I came to share it-- or I pretend to; I’m not sure which. I think it was a little of both, now one and now the other.” (Ibsen, 1920). Besides, she explained that “When I look back on it now, it seems to me I’ve been living here like a pauper—just a hand-to-mouth kind of existence.” (Ibsen, 1920).

Patriarchy originates from the Greek word (*patria*), which means lineage or descent, and domination, authority, or sovereignty. It refers to a societal system in which men exercise their superiority over women in all aspects of life. This system results in the exploitation and oppression of women, depriving them of the right to make decisions, express opinions, or hold positions of power that reflect their superiority. Society is an amalgamation of various cultures that have developed over time. Generally, patriarchy is considered a revered word for men, while it is a pejorative term for women (Ullah, Abbas, Abbas, & Ashfaq, 2019).

Irigaray stated that femininity, as represented by the symbols and structures of patriarchal and traditional society, creates a gender dichotomy that affords men certain privileges. When examining the construction and authority of males in community, we may observe the limitation of the concept of womanhood in a given work. The limitation’s impacts can shape the status of females within an association that is founded on masculine principles. *On This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray contended that female sexuality has historically been conceptualized through masculine paradigms. As such, she advocated for alternative paths towards self-discovery. It is evident that the patriarchal norms that dominate society constrain women's thoughts and principles (Kafshgarkolaie & Kami, 2022).

In this play, various feminist critics have emphasized the presence of a patriarchal society that impedes women from attaining success and liberation. Through the portrayal of the protagonist, Ibsen aims to highlight the oppression and suppression experienced by women. Torvald’s actions towards Nora were a violation of her rights and a form of insult. His refusal to allow Nora to stay and care for her children is an example of how he disregarded Nora’s rights as a mother (Prasertiani *et al.*, 2021). As he announced that “You’ll go on living here; that goes without saying. But I won’t let you bring up the children; I dare not trust you with them.” (Ibsen, 1920).

### Female Subjectivity

Most unequivocal proposition for political engagement is the concept of "mimesis" expressed by Irigaray. Mimesis is based on the identification that the subject’s status in Western culture is established on the idealized and psychic image of masculinity. This dominant subjectivity is anchored in men’s idealized psychic experience, which forms the regulatory

foundation of male involvement. Consequently, it can be posited that women necessitate a social normative status that emanates from their autonomous, irreducible, and encapsulated experiences. This, in turn, results in their representation in society which being diminished to a mere reflection of masculine presence. From an individualistic standpoint, this proposition implies that females are deprived of the beneficial interrelationships between their sensual body, imaginative morphology, and subjective normative presence.

Kierkegaard announced that individuals are concrete entities by virtue of their existence, which affords them the capacity to make existential decisions. Such decision-making capabilities are contingent upon the human attributes of freedom and responsibility. When women exercise their freedom, they are empowered to delineate their identity. This power of self-actualization is especially salient with respect to their ability to make choices and decisions. The ability to make personal and subjective choices in the face of adversity is an important aspect of achieving authenticity. Nora’s character exemplifies the aesthetic stage, as evidenced by her disregard for the opinions of others when she incurs debt. This attitude connotes Nora’s ability to actualize her life through personal and subjective decision-making. As a matter of fact, Nora was dissatisfied with her identity as an individual (Permata & Chandraningrum, 2019).

Feminist critics acknowledge that women need to embrace their subjectivity as portrayed by the protagonist ‘Nora’ in *A Doll’s House*. Besides, as subordinates, women are unjustly deprived of the opportunity to associate with or oppose their male superiors. Nora’s existence is reduced to mere entertainment. It is evident that Nora endeavors to resolve her predicament in her own manner; however, Torvald persistently undermines her. Nora’s suggestions are consistently dismissed by Torvald as he views her as a child who is incapable of serious consideration. According to the play, Torvald asserted that “You are a wife and a mother before you are anything else.” (Ibsen, 1920). On the other hand, Nora answered “I don’t believe that any more. I believe I am first of all a human being, just as much as you –or at any rate that I must try to become one.” (Ibsen, 1920). What’s more, Nora bravely declared that “But you were quite right. I am not qualified. Something else has to come first. Somehow I have to grow up myself. And you are not the man to help me do that.” (Ibsen, 1920). She also added that “That’s a job I have to do by myself. And that’s why I’m leaving you.” (Ibsen, 1920). Finally, she confirmed her decision by expressing that “I must see to it that I get experience, Torvald” (Ibsen, 1920).

## CONCLUSION

In this study, we explored the roles and rights of women in a male-dominated age, during which women were often regarded as insecure and dependent properties

without autonomous and authentic identities. We examined the various boundaries that women faced in a discriminatory society. Moreover, *A Doll's House* is a prime instance of realism in theater, particularly in realistic prose drama. The play's central message is that true marriage is a union of equals. At the conclusion of *A Doll's House*, Nora demonstrated her liberation, authority, and agency by departing from her husband and children in order to gain a deeper understanding of her subjectivity, social norms, and the dominant culture. According to Irigaray, the symbolic manifestation of femininity, emblematic configurations of a male-dominated, and customary community culminate in gender differentiation and endow men with a distinctive privilege. Therefore, this study is grounded in Irigaray's feminist theories and principles with regards to women's agency and subjectivity within a patriarchal society. Irigaray criticized the inequities present in society and encouraged women to strive for their goals, rights, and genuine nature in order to transform their objectified roles. She expressed that women must recognize their skills and capabilities in order to present change in their lives and in feminist concepts. The culmination of *A Doll's House* marks the pivotal juncture between Nora's life as an inessential entity and her emergence as a person with a spiritualized existence. This serves as the point of transformation from a shadow existence into a rebirth character by a soulful and spiritual dimension.

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