

## The Phases Of Showalter's Feminist Criticism Prefigured In Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House

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### **Abstract:**

Elaine Showalter (1941- ) is one of the most influential American literary critics and feminists who influenced feminist literary criticism by developing the concept and practice of gyno-criticism. She published *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Brontë to Lessing* in 1977 and whose expanded edition came out in 1999. By and large this book explicates Showalter's groundwork to revive the interest in long-forgotten women writers in British literature history. It was a monumental work, indeed a kind of rediscovery, mapping widely rather than mining deeply the territory of women's writing. In a sense, feminist criticism came of age with this book. Showalter suggests that women themselves were slowly growing aware of their separateness from men and leaving a record of that awareness in their works. It is the growth of a collective self-consciousness—the history of a distinct literary subculture—that *A Literature of Their Own* sets out to record. 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' (1979) is one of her well known essays that focused on the feminist literary criticism of the literature. In this essay, Showalter has rejected the inevitability of the male theories and male models by tracing the history of women's literature in the present writing. 'Toward a Feminist Poetics' by Showalter also refers to the three phases of feminist literary criticism. The first phase is the feminine phase where women aimed to compete with male writers, and compared their craft with that of their male contemporaries. The second phase is the feminist phase where the critics focus on the injustices and wrongs done to women in literary texts, and reject the conventional roles of females. Finally, the female phase is independent of the dependency on and obsession with the male literature. It instead aims to focus on creating a female literary tradition that includes women's internal experiences and personal history. This theoretical literary presentation of Showalter can be dramatically viewed in the evolution of character Nora in *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen (1828 -1906). Ibsen was a Norwegian playwright and theatre director. He was one of the founders of modernism in theatre and often called "the father of realism" and the most influential playwright of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *A Doll's House* is a three acts play through which Ibsen challenged the stereotypical representation of women in literature with his female characters and remains a great contribution to feminist literature.

**Keywords:** Feminist Criticism, Gyno-criticism, Imitation, Advocacy, Self-discovery.

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### **I. Showalter And Feminist Criticism**

Showalter categorizes feminist criticism into *woman as a reader*, and *woman as a writer*. 'Woman as a reader' or feminist critique focuses on literature written by men. It highlights the stereotypical perception of womanhood and explores traditional ideological assumptions in literary works by men. On the other hand, 'woman as a writer' or gyno-criticism focuses on woman as a writer where she is the one who creates the text, history, meaning, etc. Showalter contends that all literary subculture can be traced through three major phases: first a phase of "imitation" and "internalization" in which the subculture largely adopts the values and the literary forms of the dominant tradition. It was a phase which extends from the widespread appearance of the male pseudonym in the 1840s to the death of Gorge Eliot in 1880. The period followed the male norms that "internalized the dominant male aesthetic standards". 'Women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of male culture and internalized its assumption about female nature.' The next a phase of "advocacy" or "protest" in which the subculture rejects prevailing values and begins to declare its autonomy—a stage which Showalter associates with the years between 1880 and the winning of the vote in 1920. The phase protested against the male canons, values and the texts that stereotyped women. This was the period of separatist utopia. In fact, in this phase, women wrote biases of males. According to Showalter, the final phase is a turning inward and a search for identity which begins around 1920 and continues to the present. It is the phase

where women reject both imitation and protest- the two forms dependency and dare for “self-discovery” and “independence”. It is the beginning of a stage marked by “courageous self-exploration”.

Understanding the feminist criticism of Showalter explained in three phases, can be summed up in terms of the distinct literary subculture's “imitation”, “advocacy” and “self-discovery” against the dominating patriarchal literary culture. This theoretical literary presentation of Showalter can be dramatically viewed in the evolution of character Nora in *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen. *A Doll's House* is a three acts play through which Ibsen challenged the stereotypical representation of women in literature with his female characters. It is a great contribution to feminist literature. There are critics who argue that as Ibsen was not involved in any women's cause and therefore the play is not any feminist. As opined by Templeton (1989: 28), ‘Henrik Ibsen's most feminist play *A Doll's House* may not even be concerned about the women's cause but rather about humans and individualism in general. Nora, the protagonist, may not merely be a feminist heroine but rather a representation of Everyman.’ Although Ibsen never explicitly identified himself as a feminist, it would be a mistake to ignore his interest in women's cause for humanity's sake. Some of his speeches and letters prove that he was concerned about the so-called weaker sex. In his speech to the working men of Trondhjem on June 14th, 1885, he mentions:

The reshaping of social conditions which is now under way out there in Europe is concerned chiefly with the future position of the workingman and of woman. That it is which I hope for and wait for; and it is that that I will work for (Ibsen 1910: 54).

Ibsen never overtly admitted being a feminist as proved by his speech held at the festival of the Norwegian Women's Right

I am not a member of the Women's Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda. I have been more poet and less social philosopher than people generally seem to believe. I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honour of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of humanity in general. And if you read my books carefully, you will understand this. True enough, it is desirable to solve the problem of women's rights, along with the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity (Ibsen 1910: 65).

Ibsen makes clear that his concerns were neither political nor feminist but rather human. Perhaps he might have believed that one necessarily does not need to be a feminist in order to defend women and humanity but just a human. When Ibsen made an attempt to explain why women instead of men should be consulted about the married women's property bill, he commented: “to consult men in such a matter is like asking wolves if they desire better protection for the sheep” (Finney 1994: 90). The reason why he never labelled himself as a feminist or supporter of feminism may be due to “Ibsen's frequently voiced disinclination to belong to parties or societies of any kind” (Finney 1994: 90). Moreover, Ibsen seemed to be surrounded by feminists in his life as well as his work. Examples of those feminists were his wife Suzannah Thoresen Ibsen and her stepmother Magdalene Thoresen who was probably the first ‘New Woman’ Ibsen met in his life. Magdalene Thoresen was a Danish writer and also translated French plays which were staged by Ibsen. A detailed study of Ibsen makes clear that Ibsen is a quasi-socialist at one end and a humanist at the other” as opined by Finney (Finney 1994: 89). The feminism of Ibsen can be gleaned from his humanism.

American feminist criticism, no doubt influenced by British feminist criticism was affected by the civil rights movement of the 1960s. American feminist criticism's main concern was restoring and including writings of female authors to the literary canon. ‘Much celebrated American literary critics Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their book *Still Mad: American Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination* write that ‘men whose voice has been dominant for far too long, define and create images of women as they please.’ And they point out that ‘the two main stereotypical images created by men are “the angel in the house” and “the mad woman in the attic”, both equally unrealistic. These images need to be examined and debunked for women to achieve literary autonomy’ (Bressler 1999: 177-8). These two stereotypical images get similar expressions in the affectionate nicknames used by Torvald for Nora in *A Doll's House*. *A Doll's House* at the beginning features the stereotypical representation of women as irrational, naive and over dependent on men; and the Victorian dichotomy of the public and private spheres which “relegates women to the demesne of domesticity and deprives them of a political voice while requiring that men identify with a discourse of rationality which splits off and denies the importance of feeling” (Rice and Waugh 2001: 143).

## **II. The Phase Of ‘Self Denial And Imitation’ In *A Doll's House***

Torvald spends most of the time in public domain, even at home gets engaged with his work and therefore spends rarely time with his wife and children. The play does not present any scene of interaction between him and the children. A few examples can be seen in the play such as the comment that he makes at the return of the children from a walk with their nurse, “the place will only be bearable for a mother now” (Act 1) also makes clear his less interaction with them. The request by Nora to Torvald to look at what she bought at the

shopping, his reply is: "Don't disturb me" (Act 1) and he comes out after completing his works. This shows that his main job as the man is to do his business. When Nora explains that she had expected Torvald to take the blame for the mentioned crime by her, he also makes clear that his reputation is more important than his love for her when he says that "no man would sacrifice his honour for the one he loves" (Act 3: 94). Torvald is portrayed as rational, imperious and to some degree even emotionally cold. He tells Nora to save money and forbids her from eating sweets in order not to ruin her teeth. He takes his wife, or women in general, as intellectually inferior as well. When he explains to her why he is not fond of borrowing and spending too much money, he uses himself as an example and expects her to imitate him. Torvald's reaction to Nora for not bothering about the people who came to the house whom she would not know, is: "That is like a woman!" (Act 1: 3). He previously called her a "featherhead" (Act 1: 2) as well. Nora even asks Torvald to decide for her a costume for a fancy dress party and he tells her to dress as a Neopolitan fisher girl and dance the tarantella. However Nora chooses costume and is a symbolic of her desire to break free from her controlled life in Torvald's house. In the second act, he gives frequent instructions to Nora during her dance practice. Torvald takes it as his duty to instruct Nora about what she needed to do or say, what had to wear and eat, how to behave or conduct etc. Nora was becoming Torvald in her life than herself. Contrary to that, his wife, Nora, is mostly confined to the private sphere; in the play, her contact with the outside world is very less and is limited to shopping and visiting neighbours (she comes back from a shopping trip in the opening scene of Act 1 and in Act 3 neighbour's party with Torvald). Nora is economically fully dependent on Torvald. He advises her for having spent too much money on the Christmas gifts. She has been portrayed as irrational, (at least superficially) submissive, naïve, childish, over-dependent and an imitator of Torvald. She is even called a child by Mrs. Linde in Act 1(13) and Torvald calls her so several times during the play; he even mentions that she has "become both wife and child to him" (Act 3: 88).

### **III. The Phase Of Self-Assertion And Advocacy**

In the life of Nora, there come moments of understanding the people and situations which force her into series of conflicts with herself and others and they get gradually resolved through her protests and advocacy. Nora is ignorant of the law and, as rightly pointed out by Torvald "(you don't) understand the conditions of the world in which [you] live" (Act 3: 93); she justifies her criminal act of forgery by arguing that she was "spar[ing] her dying father anxiety and care" and "sav[ing] her husband's life" (Act 1: 32). It is worth mentioning that not all female characters in the play are treated the same as immature and submissive personality; Mrs. Christine Linde gives a stark contrast to the character of Nora. Christine is older than Nora and has a more "dejected and timid" (Act 1: 7) manner; Torvald even describes her as a "frightful bore" (Act 3: 77). "Life, and hard, bitter necessity have taught" (Act 3: 71) her to be prudent. She does not seem to approve of Nora's keeping secrets from her husband and prevents Krogstad from recalling his letter in Act 3. She says that "this unhappy secret must be enclosed; they must have a complete understanding between them, which is impossible with all this concealment and falsehood going on" (Act 3: 74). Another difference between her and Nora is Mrs. Linde's relationship with her true love, Krogstad. They are capable of openly talking to each other even after being separated for many years, while Nora and Torvald only have a serious conversation at the end of Act 3 after eight years of marriage. They share almost the same plight; both are widowed and described by Christine as "two shipwrecked people" that "could join forces" (Act 3: 71). According to Code (2000: 342), it is the "women's disproportionate confinement in the private sphere [that] correlates with women's subordinate status". Nora's absence from the public sphere makes her economically completely dependent on her husband and even the private sphere does not belong to her alone. As a man Torvald not only controls public affairs but also the private ones. According to Torvald, women who fail in keeping themselves and their family untainted are to blame when their offspring turns out bad. Torvald even remarks that "almost everyone who has gone to the bad early in life has had a deceitful mother" (Act 1: 36). Furthermore, after Torvald finds out about Nora's crime, he threatens "to not allow [her] to bring up the children" for he does not dare to "trust them to [her]" (Act 3: 86). This division "put[s] women on a pedestal but also in a cage" (Guerin, et al. 2011: 255), or in this play's case a doll's house.

### **IV. The Phase Of Self-Discovery And Realization**

Towards the end of the play Nora realizes that their "home has been nothing but a playroom"; she was only her husband's "doll-wife" and previously had been her father's "dollchild" (Act 3: 90). She had "merely existed to perform tricks" for her husband (ibid.). As mentioned earlier, Gilbert and Gubar identified "the angel of the home" and "the mad women in the attic" as the main stereotypical images of women in literature (Bressler 1999: 177). Oddly, the female characters of A Doll's House are betwixt and between those two images. Mrs. Linde had to work in the public sphere after her husband's death to support her family. She remarks that she "could not endure life without work" but after her mother had passed away and her two young brothers had grown up, she felt "quite alone in the world" and realized that there was "not the least pleasure in

working for one's self" (Act 3: 72). She wants "to be a mother for someone" (ibid.); that is, despite her independence she longs for a family and the traditional role of "the angel of the home". She is selfless and ready to put her own happiness aside for the sake of the ones she loves (characteristics that would suit an "angel"). This is proven by her marriage to a wealthy man only for the sake of being able to provide for her sick mother and two younger brothers; she did not marry him because she is a materialist. On the contrary, she cannot comprehend Nora's excitement about Torvald's promotion and believes that it "would be delightful to have what one needs" (Act 1: 9); apparently, she is not interested in "heaps and heaps of money" (ibid.). Nora, on the other hand, is a different case and somewhat undergoes a transition from an imperfect angel to a monster or madwoman. She outwardly seems to be the cheerful, innocent "angel of the home" but even before the final act she proves that she is no angel. Torvald's "little squirrel" and "singing skylark", as he has called her multiple times in the play, turns cold and quiet after seeing her husband's true nature. She begins questioning their life together, her life with her father and even religion. The answers to her questions can only be found by her alone and that is when she decides to neglect her duties as a mother and wife in order to fulfil the duties she has to herself.

In his play, Ibsen presents women, whether good or bad, are human beings with virtues as well as faults. It is the realization that Nora is not a doll with the duties of a wife and mother "but before all else [...] a reasonable human being" (Act 3: 92) with duties to herself that causes her to leave her family and home. Ibsen might have used Mrs. Linde's character to challenge the traditional public/private split of society. Contrary to the common belief, Mrs. Linde had not been deprived of her morality by having entered the male-dominated public sphere. Nora, on the other hand, has comparatively more shortcomings though she has been mostly confined to the private space which supposedly should keep her pure and untainted. She, nevertheless, does not refrain from keeping secrets from her husband and occasionally telling him fibs. Earning her own money and being independent has not harmed Mrs. Linde. She enjoys her work but also longs for the role of a loving mother and wife. She is supposed to show that a woman who enjoys her financial independence does not have to give up family life. Ibsen used two different couples in his play to show how the fate of a marriage based on the equality of both spouses differentiates from one based on the dominance of the husband and the suppression of the wife. Krogstad and Christine enjoy a happy ending after a fair share of hardships as two equals deciding to unite and form a family. On the other hand, Torvald and Nora's marriage, in which Nora had been underestimated and considered inferior by her husband, shatters into pieces after eight long years due to a lack of communication and understanding.

Nora replies that Torvald has never understood her and that, until that evening, she has never understood Torvald. She points out that—for the first time in their eight years of marriage—they are now having a "serious conversation." She has realized that she has spent her entire life being loved not for who she is but for the role she plays. To both her father and to Torvald, she has been a plaything—a doll. She realizes she has never been happy in Torvald's dollhouse but has just been performing for her keep. She has deluded herself into thinking herself happy, when in truth she has been miserable. Torvald admits that there is some truth to Nora's comments and asserts that he will begin to treat Nora and the children as pupils rather than playthings. Nora rejects his offer, saying that he is not equipped to teach her, nor she the children. Instead, she says, she must teach herself, and therefore she insists upon leaving Torvald. He forbids her to leave, but she tells him that she has decided to cut off all dependence upon him, so he cannot dictate her actions. Torvald points out how she will appear to others, but Nora insists that she does not care. He then tries to persuade Nora to stay in order to fulfill her "sacred duties" to her husband and her children, but Nora responds that she has an equally important duty to herself. She no longer believes Torvald's assertion that she is "a wife and mother above everything else." Ibsen suggests that one finds himself or herself not in an independent life but rather in an independent *will*. Nora exits her doll's house with a door slam, emphatically resolving the play with an act of bold self-assertion.

## V. Conclusion

Nora, the protagonist moves through three phases in the play *A Doll's House*. It is a journey of Nora, a fettered and an over-dependent woman presented in the first scene, going through inner and outer conflicts, finally becomes free and unfettered by any bond, divine or human, and goes into a world of freedom, at the last scene. The play begins by the coming of the over-dependent Nora into 'the house of a man' which symbolises a patriarchal society with dominant culture, and it ends with her shocking exit from the house to the world of freedom and possibilities. It is the flight of the liberated woman, an exit from the doll's house of a man to the world of a woman that defines her as a woman in her culture. The first act presents Nora as a woman who lives 'the life of a man and in his world', the second act and the beginning of third present a 'different Nora' with inner struggle, conflicts, personal decisions and assertions of herself with her way of doings. It was an acceptance of her own world and rejection of imitations. At the end she becomes a woman of her decisions, an emancipated woman, an awakened soul who is ready to depart for a self-discovery and realization of her own

self. The journey of Nora through these three stages parallels with the three phases Showalter mentions in feminist criticism. Nora was given a great freedom of choice by her creator; and she is not chained to her family by the shackles of duty as wife and mother but is free to stay and bear it or leave. Ibsen's support of the feminist movement and ideology becomes evident not only through his characters and subject matter of his plays but also through his engagement in the women's cause whether he admitted it or not. On a wider note, it can be understood that the feminist concerns of Ibsen stem from his major concerns for humanity on a larger scale.

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