

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## THE FINANCIAL EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN IN PLAYS OF IBSEN: A MODERNIST STUDY

SUMAIRA RASHID

Pakistan



### ABSTRACT

The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen is the pioneer as the father of modern Drama due to his scholarly technique of writing to depict the human issues of his society. He has tried to show the financial exploitation of the ladies of great potential suppressed under the sway of man. Ibsen raises the fundamental questions about the position of the ladies treated as mean creature in a male dominated society. She is weak and subordinated to man for her financial issues. She has no right for property. She has to depend fully on man for her materialistic pursuits. This study is a journey to the dark and gloomy aspect of the financial position of the ladies. It manifests the stereotype held by men, who believe that women are only slaves in their hands. It tries to scrutinize the pathetic condition of the ladies from a modern stand point where a woman finds herself shackled in the masculine world.

**Key words:** Modernism, subordination, emancipation, stereotype, financial exploitation

©KY PUBLICATIONS

### 1. INTRODUCTION

When Ibsen was writing women were enslaved in their gender roles, and certain restrictions were enforced upon them in a male dominated society. The woman had neither any self-control nor any self-government but was subjected to yield to the control of stronger role. In 1950s women could not hold the responsibilities over house, debts or banks. They were considered as careless and powerless. They were not allowed to have any kind of training or to do any job. A single woman could request to be placed into job under the authority of a guardian. Before the suffrage movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century, women enjoyed a few rights only. By the end of 1890s, women got the

right to their own wealth. Unmarried women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were not expected to do any kind of work until the financial crisis arises at home. A woman was dependent on her father in her father's house and after his death the mother would get control over her till her marriage. After marriage woman was expected to live in her husband's house and depend on him. For a woman marriage was a financial transaction, usually marrying into a rich family. Ibsen has tried to awaken the consciousness and conscience of the world towards the suffering and the misery of the ladies that man finds as the source of his pleasure. The modern concept of the financial position of the ladies has changed. Now they can take part actively to raise their family. They

can write fiction according to their tastes and demands. They are no more subordinate to the will of their husbands and can rebel whenever they want. This modern concept of the emancipation of these ladies has strengthened the financial position of the women of 21<sup>st</sup> century. As the modern feminist critic Virginia Woolf has asserted in her famous book, "A Room of One's Own" that a woman must have money and a room if she wants to write fiction. Ibsen becomes a sympathetic spectator and a supporter of the women who find no room for improvement under the dominion of man over her.

In this study the researcher will use analytical research methodology and tool will be reading and interpreting the text. This research will be qualitative and descriptive based on library and internet resources. As a part of methodology of this research, this broad study of the related books especially critically read out a vast variety of literary discourses of original and western as well as English writers, where the analyses of suppression, abduction, economic exploitation, victimization of women and distinct versions of feminine power, agencies of power and different forms of feminine joint power will be offered.

## **2. Nora's Disillusionment for her financial pursuits and Rebellion against Domesticity:**

Ibsen in his play, *A Doll's House*, puts forward that traditional attitude of men towards women did not change till the end of eighteenth century. Men were not ready to give any kind of equal rights to women. Mrs. Helmer is enthralled by the power and money available to men only. She decorates for the Christmas and spends money lavishly for gifts and the Christmas tree. Helmer questions Nora's use of money: "Bought you say? All that there? Has the little spendthrift been out throwing money around again?" Nora feels freedom in spending money because of Torvald's expected salary increase: "Torvald we can squander a little now. Can't we? Just a tiny wee bit. Now that you've got a big salary and are going to make piles and piles of money."

Torvald dislikes spending and borrowing money from the anticipated raise. When she mentions about borrowing money, Torvald responds, "Nora you know what I think about that.

No debts! Never borrow! Something of freedom's lost-and something of beauty, too from home that's founded on borrowing and debt." [Act I, p. 124] Torvald Helmer as a husband is ready to meet all the expenses of his wife and make her life comfortable for her as he can, however when it comes to respecting his wife thoughts as an individual sharing the whole life with him, he is devoid of this virtue to sharing with her. *A Doll's House* "centers around the two personalities of husband and wife" [Lucas, 1962:131]

At the beginning of the play, we find that Mrs. Helmer is happy because her husband fulfills her needs and she has also devoted her life to him. Ibsen focuses on the relationship between husband and wife where husband is to command and wife is to obey. Even Nora does not have a chance to do something, including saving her husband's life for herself. That's why Nora has to keep it secret how she had to borrow money to spend for the health of her husband. She had been secretly paying the monthly installments for the payment of the loan.

She had been leading a life of self-denial in order to be able to pay those monthly installments. She knows that her husband regards her as an item of his property but she feels satisfied as to be his "treasured possession". She has character strong enough to sacrifice everything of her own to keep the family safe and sound at the time when a "wife cannot borrow without her husband's consent". For the sake of her husband she does not hesitate to forge "her father's signature. To her eyes with a woman's common sense directness, a feigned signature seems in such circumstances a pure formality: for her father would of course have signed, had he not been at death's door" [Lucas, 1962:135]

She is the spokesman of those people who believe in the family union of two people who sacrifice their lives for each other whenever they need. She explains the gravity of this case to Krogstad when he threatens her to prove her illegal action in the court: "This I refuse to believe. A daughter hasn't a right to protect her dying father from anxiety and care? A wife has not a right to save her husband's life? I don't know much about laws

but I am sure that somewhere in the books these things are allowed”.

Nora believes that she can overcome the outside forces and expects from her husband that he will understand her. However her husband blames her for what she has done for him even then she does not want to show Krogstad as a culprit:

NORA: ... But tell me, was it really such a crime that this Krogstad committed?

HELMER: Forgery. Do you have any idea what that means?

NORA: Couldn't he have done it out of need?

HELMER: Yes, or thoughtlessness, like so many others. I'm not so heartless that I'd condemn a man categorically for just one mistake. [Act I, p. 160]

Miss Nora's sense of guilt arouses in her and she begins to feel miserable. She finds herself in a wretched condition firstly because of Krogstad's threat to expose her secret to her husband and secondly because she has developed the feeling that she may be corrupting the children and poisoning the home by her very presence. We also find Mrs. Christine Linde, the friend of Nora Helmer suffering from financial problems. She gives an account to Nora about her past and present circumstances. She tells her that she had married a rich man whom she did not love. In fact her poor circumstances had compelled her to marry a rich man. At that time she had two younger brothers to look after. When her husband died, his business was destroyed and nothing was left for her. So she had to open a shop and afterwards a school to maintain the family. That was a time of great ordeal for her and now she is leading a life without having a serious purpose.

Now she has come to Nora to find a steady job for her. Nora tells her that her husband may be helpful to her in finding a job for her in the bank. Linde feels very grateful to Nora for offering her help in her difficult situation. We can see through the character of Nora that to what extent these ladies depend on their fathers being unmarried and on their husbands being married. Even a single lady has to suffer a lot for the maintenance of her life.

**3. Hedda Gabler as a failed wife to compromise with the low status of her husband**

The play, *Hedda Gabler* shows that Hedda is the daughter of General Gabler rather than the wife of George Tesman. As the play proceeds, it unfolds the truth that she is an upper class lady but has married Tesman only because her father has left her no financial resources, nothing but a respectable heritage. She informs Brack of her decision of marriage with Tesman: "My time was up.....And George Tesman.....he is after all a thoroughly acceptable choice....there's every chance in time that he could still make a name of himself." [Act II, p. 38-39]

It all shows about her materialistic approach that she has chosen to marry a man of middle class foreseeing that one day he will be able to earn some name and when she is asked about her love for her husband, she remarks: "Ugh---don't use that syrupy word!" In fact, the individuals of bourgeois society in Ibsen's plays, sell their love in favour of a marriage without love but with economical advantages. And from this trade, the family destroys the happiness; it is the basic institution that prevents the emotional fulfillment of the individuals. Husband, wife and the children become the worst sufferers.

Thus the breakdown comes in the family with economy and politics. Tesman has racked up tons of debt. In trying to provide Hedda with a nice house and nice things; he has staked their future on a job that he may not receive; his scholarship is centered on topics that hold very little interest to the public at large.

Towards the end of Act I, we come to know that Hedda's happy life is not as it seems. Tesman is now not only heavily in debt, but has discovered that there is a competition for a job for which he was essentially promised. Aunt Juju tries to get on well with Hedda but there is great difference between their class backgrounds. Hedda insults Miss Tesman when she wears her servant's hat which she left in the drawing room: "But what a thing to do, throw her hat down in someone's drawing room. People don't do such things." [Act I, p. 14] When she complains to Tesman about her old piano that does not match the furniture in the room. Tesman says: "As soon as I start getting my salary we'll see about changing it." [Act I, p. 15] Hedda is unable to adjust

with the middle class family and feels depressed under poor financial conditions. She acknowledges bourgeois society as the root of her slavery: "It's the middle-class world that I have got into. It's that that makes life so wretched!"

Thea Elvestd and Mademoisell Danielle are the women who belong to the lower middle classes. Thea is the governess of Mr.Elvested' children and after his wife died, she married Mr. Elvested. There is a great difference between their ages. "I just can't stand him! We haven't a single thought in common. Nothing at all---he and I." She has left her husband with the hope of using her sexuality to secure a loving marriage with a better prospect, Loevborg.

But unfortunately her plan has failed. Now the question arises how she will manage to support herself as she is left with a bad fortune of money. Mademoisell Danielle who is a singer and a prostitute, she has taken to offering sexuality in order to secure herself in a male-dominated world. Instead of finding any husband to support her, she has found freedom in becoming a prostitute. The ways which she has adopted are socially unacceptable by the Norwegian society. Ibsen has taken these acute problems of the ladies of bourgeois society and presented them on the stage through Hedda and other ladies in the play.

#### **4. Gina Ekdal's exploitation by Werle and the financial crisis in Ekdal's House**

Gina Ekdal in the play, *Wild Duck*, is the woman who suffers from the financial crisis in Werle's' as well as Ekdal's house. As a maid servant she is dependent on Hakoon Werle and exploited by him. Werle seduces her by sexual inclinations towards her and then he gets her married with his old friend's son Hjalmar Ekdal. Thus Gina's financial dependence shifts from Werle to Ekdal. In Ekdal's house she has totally forgotten about her past and has devoted herself to her husband and the family. Hjalmar Ekdal is authoritatively the head of the family but in fact it is Gina, his wife who does the work and controls the house. It is she who takes the photographs and the photographer Hjalmar Ekdal only retouches them.

In Act II, we find Gina and her daughter Hedvig reviewing the cost of the food supplies as Gina adds up the sums in an account book and

writes down that she has received eight crowns fifty for taking photographs to help offset household costs. She knows very well that Ekdal withdraws after lunch to his sofa to ponder over his invention and she attends the customers. When Hjalmar comes to know about Gina's past life, he tells her that he will do all the account himself- or at least check the accounts. He also questions her about her keeping the households going on with so little money, 'How is it done?' He further probes into the matter and asks about old Werle's payment for the copies, "Well, about how does he get? Tell me!" Gina replies, "It varies so much. It comes to about what he costs us and a little over for pocket-money."

Finally he accuses her of having an understanding with him when she had been working for him. We find Gina's position throughout the play that money has caused her wretched condition as an exploited and degraded lady before and after marriage. She has resigned to her fate to do work and be submissive to others. She considers it her moral duty to work day and night for the uplifting of the family. She has learnt to take an easy way of life in every condition.

Hedvig is the pathetic figure and martyred child. She is of uncertain parentage, belonging to either Hjalmar or Werle and passed from former to latter in marriage to circumvent the public scandal. Hjalmar Ekdal loves her too much. She is dependent on her father for her economic needs. As the family has to face the financial crisis, she tries to support her father also by helping her mother Gina in the Photo studio. Her beloved father disowns her when he comes to know that Werle is her biological father and her future is assured by Werle's beneficence. In fact it happens when after morning walk, Hedvig tells her father that she met Mrs. Sorby who gave her a birthday present. When he asks about the present, she replies, "Mother is to give it to me tomorrow morning before I get up." She allows her father to see this gift. She withdraws a parcel from her pocket and gives it to her father.

It is written in the handwriting of Mr. Werle. Werle writes that old Ekdal need not to do more work as he is granting him 100 crowns a

month. After the death of old Ekdal, the money will be transferred to Hedvig for the whole life.

Hjalmar is overjoyed when Hedvig says that she will turn over the money to father and mother. Gregers tells Ekdal that his father is setting a trap for him. Hjalmar is deeply moved at it, he asks Gina, "Does Hedvig belong to me-or-?" Gina says that she does not know. Gregers says to Hjalmar that they three must be together to attain the true frame of mind and sacrifice and forgive one another. Hjalmar replies to him, " Never! Never!.....I have no child" Thus he deprives Hedvig of every kind of fatherly affection and care for her basic needs.

### **5.Mrs Elving's struggle to control the financial affairs of the family**

Mrs. Elving in "*The Ghost*" is a wealthy widow and has more control over the financial affairs, though she has left the running of the orphanage to Pastor Manders. She is sincere and hardworking. She has increased her business through her wealth and vice versa. She is a charitable lady. She has accepted the social responsibilities and is considered a pillar of the society by the people who were ignorant of her married life. Using her "purchase price....the exact amount that made Lieutenant such a good match in his day....she donated year by year, to this orphanage in an attempt to expunge her "bad conscience" and conceal the past". [Mc Farlane & Arup, 1990, p.119]

The novel, "*Madam Bovary*" is written by a French novelist Gustave Flaubert. It discovers the social issues faced by the women of bourgeois class in his times. Emma's disappointments stem from the dissatisfaction with the world of French bourgeois. She has always dreamt of enjoying a more refined and sophisticated taste than that of her class. This lack of wealth brings frustration in her and she is exploited by the male supremacy for the fulfillment of her financial needs. This frustration reflects a rising social and historical trend among the ladies in the last half of the nineteenth century.

Madam Bovary shows how much absurd, stifling and potentially harmful the attitudes and trappings of the bourgeois can be. Once she has married Charles, but her illusion of a happy married life has dashed to the grounds. She is utterly

helpless and powerless in his company. His idleness prevents him from becoming a good doctor and his ineptitude prevents him from advancing into a higher social stratum that might satisfy Emma's yearnings. As a result Emma is stuck into a country town without much money. While men have power of wealth and property, the only currency Emma possess is to influence others is her body, a form of money she can trade only in secret with the price of shame and the added expense of deception.

When she pleads desperately to pay for debts, men offer the money in returns for sexual favours. Eventually she tries to win back Rodolph as a lover if he will pay her debts. Thus she is exploited by men both physically and mentally. She is not only deprived of money but also her chastity. The poorness of bourgeois was frustrating to Flaubert and he used Emma Bovary's disgust as a way of conveying his own hatred for the middle class. Caroline Blackwood writes in *On the Perimeter*:

It was the acceptance that they were helpless to change the destructive course of all the governments who ignored the misery and unemployment of their people as they sunk the financial resources of the nation into death-dealing weapons that had made these women angry. It was a helpless anger that had given them the courage to put up a symbolic fight. If nothing was to be gained by their struggle, they certainly knew that nothing could be lost. By their symbolic presence on Greenham Common, they hoped to act as the voice of the millions of people all over the world who recognized that they had no voice.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* throws light on the poor plight of women throughout history. Her outstanding words are preserved for the future generations of women in *Room of One's own*. Woolf reads the lives of women and concludes that if a woman is to write, she should overcome the enormous circumstances. Her initial thesis is that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' [Woolf, 1977: p.4].

This essay is the manifesto of the modern feminist movement and has been called the declaration of the independence of women. Virginia

writes that her main goal for writing this essay was to encourage these women who feel depressed under poor financial conditions and can't write even a single piece of literature to support them. Thus they are bound to depend on their husbands and suffer from the financial crisis. She questions the fundamental effects of poverty on fiction and the conditions which are necessary for the works of art. She recognized the necessity of the writer's financial dependence to the birth writing, but she failed to discover the true meaning of relationship to great writing of another freedom; for just as economic freedom allows one to inhabit a physical....a room of one's own....so does mental freedom allows one to inhabit one's own mind and body.

Virginia seems to believe that the development and expression of creative genius hinges upon the mental freedom of the writer. And that the development of mental freedom hinges upon the economic freedom of the writer. Thus it wouldn't be wrong to say that Virginia has boosted up the courage of the women of the modern times to take the initial to come out of their limited spheres and beat their financial problems. For this purpose she encourages the ladies to assert their value in the society by writing the works on literature. Thus they can express their suppressed feelings which they were not allowed to express. Thus the woman of the modern age can do any respectful job that satisfies her according to the financial demands. Virginia's work, "A Room of One's Own" occupies a special place in literature with regard to its financial and psychological value.

#### Conclusion

To sum up the discussion, it can be said that Ibsen has discussed the financial issues of the women and their preoccupation how they are trying to survive under men's authority. His heroines represent the women of the modern age. We cannot say that Ibsen is on female side rather he discusses the financial exploitation of them at the hands of male society considered as inferior creature. So if we want to compete with the modern times, let the women assert their value in the society. They should be encouraged that have equal share in every field with man. They should be directed to choose the right professions for them

and not go astray towards prostitution or any other objectionable activity. These ladies are fully independent to come out of their houses and work with their husbands as equal partners of life.

#### References

- Blackwood, C. (1984). "On the Perimeter". London: Flamingo, Fontana.
- Flaubert, G. (1955). "Madam Bovary: Moeurs de Province". Ed. Edouard Manial. Paris: Garnier.
- Host, E. (1958). "Hedda Gabler: en monografi".Aschehoug:Oslo.
- Lucas, F.L.(1962). " The Drama of Ibsen and Strindberg". London: Cassel.
- McFarlane, J. & Jens A. (1990). "Henrik Ibsen: Four Major Plays". Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mayer, M. (Trans) (1962). "Henrik Ibsen: Ghosts".London:Methuen.
- Northam, J. (1973). "Ibsen: A Critical Study". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Robert, R. (1963). "Illusion and the Self in the Wild Duck, Rosmersholm and The Lady from the Sea" Printed by: Scandinavian Studies. P.37-50
- Templeton, J. (1999). "Ibsen's Women". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Woolf, V. (2005). "A Room of One's Own". South Australia: The University of Adelaide Press.