

# Study Material

## The University of Burdwan

B.A. Hons (C.B.C.S.)

Course Title : MODERN EUROPEAN DRAMA

Course Code : CC XIII

SEMESTER-6

Course Credit : 6 Full Marks : 75

Prepared By : Dr. Swati Roy Chowdhury, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Mankar College.

( Contact : iamswati.src@gmail.com )

\*\*\*\*\*

### 1. A Doll's House as A Feminist Play

The main subject or issue on which the drama *A Doll's House* is written is the issue of women. More specifically, its subject is of women's status in the society and their treatment by men, the lack of true love and respect for a wife by a husband, and the lack of justice and dignity in the treatment of women in the society itself.

*A Doll's House* is a blooming field for feminist criticism. Feminist critics have seen Ibsen as a social realist, a revolutionary thinker, and a benefactor of the suppressed, repressed and oppressed women of the nineteenth century Norway and Europe. Indeed, the play concerns a woman's right to individual freedom and the ways in which marriage, especially marriage in stiflingly conventional provincial Norwegian society frustrates and thwarts the individuality of a woman who has all the potentials that her husband has. Nora, like most women of our contemporary society, has all the inherent talents for developing into a successful member of the society, as much as her husband or any man. In fact, her critical mind, sense of justice, readiness to change, absence of hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness in relation to what is called tradition, and such other positive qualities would help her to make more progress and contribute to the development of her personality, her family and her society: if she is to get the opportunities and regard of her silly husband.

In any discussion of *A Doll's House* as a feminist play, or simply as a play about women, it is necessary to rethink. Is it only about women? When asked about his intention in the play *A Doll's House*, Ibsen claimed that the play was not a 'feminist' play; he said that it was a 'humanist' play. What Ibsen meant was that the theme of this play was the need of every individual, whether man or woman, to find out the kind of person he or she really is and to strive to become that person. Ibsen meant that it was not about women only: his suggestion was that it is about justice to humanity in general. It means that we look at the problem from a higher parlance of human concern. He saw that an injustice was done to women, and he wrote about it. And this is to say that the play is about injustice first and then about women. It could be about injustice upon old men or children or the poor people. The play's concern is more humanitarian than feminist. Ibsen was more humanist, than feminist; indeed, he saw no reason why one should be 'feminist' (or man-ist for that matter) when he is already humanist.

However, Ibsen's refusal to limit the play's meaning to being 'feminist' does not change the emotional and psychological effect of the play on the audiences and the readers. It is a woman's predicament with which the play deals; it is the disillusionment of a wife that is the subject of the play; it is the drastic step taken by a wife with which the play ends; it is the woman in the play who wins our maximum sympathy. Whatever may have been Ibsen's intentions, the effect of the play is to arouse in us a great deal of sympathy for the cause of women

In short, the play seeks to expose the injustice upon women, which was inherent in the culture and attitude of the male-dominated society of the late nineteenth century Norway. It is basically a demand for justice, and whether we call it justice to humanity or justice to women, it is firstly and specifically justice to women indirectly, justice to humanity.

Most modern readers like to call *A Doll's House*, a feminist play (or at least a play about women's right and dignity) because of many reasons. This is not to say that Ibsen was an "arrant" feminist, nor to say that the play is only about women. But it is about women, or in that neutral sense, a feminist play, because it deals primarily with the desire of a woman to establish her identity and dignity in the society. It is about the disillusionment of a wife about how she has been dominated and how her basic right, her right to be someone, has been ruthlessly destroyed in the name of love by her husband. The drama is about the real and a burning social issue of a revolution that had become essential for the society to progress. Not a small matter, the very title

of the play is about the woman in it, and that title also emphatically suggests the treatment of her as if she was a lifeless doll. She has a house and now needs to search for a home, on her own.

## 2. Signification of the Slamming of the Door in A Doll's House

The slamming of the door bears paramount significance in the play. Nora, the protagonist of Ibsen's much discussed play A Doll's House is a developing character. In the earlier half of the play we see her as a submissive wife and a dutiful mother. As she knows her husband more she becomes aware of her own position and more self-conscious.

All her life she has lived according to her husband's will with no sense of self. Her patronizing and domineering husband is a representative of the patriarchal society. Her slamming the door at the end of the play is thematically significant because it symbolically stands for Nora's revolt against her husband and by extension a slap in the face of patriarchy.

Nora was dominated and controlled by her father before marriage and afterwards her husband was the agency for dominating her. Helmer never treated her as equal. He treated her as his chattel. She existed for her husband. However, she had always expected that her husband would come to her aid when she will be in trouble. She had been waiting for miracles to happen in the Krogstad's case too. She had the fear that the villain would expose everything and their family would be undone. Contrary to her expectation, her husband behaved like a hypocrite concerned more with morality and a notion of social prestige not with his wife's welfare and care. He came out in his true colors. Nora realized that her husband didn't see her as an individual, but only as a wife and mother. She knew what her husband was like. She wanted to dissolve her ties with him by abandoning him and the children. She thought her duty towards herself was above her duty as a mother and wife. Her status as a non - entity was a product of the functioning of patriarchy. She wanted to educate herself and establish her own identity. Slamming the door is the explosion of her energies against patriarchy. It's a challenge to patriarchy. It's a bold act of revolt against male domination. The crux of the whole play hinges on this single incident. It is an individual's search for freedom.

It signifies that a lady who realizes the necessity to cultivate her full identity must be ready to sacrifice even an atom of care and concern for her children and husband. Motherly duty, the instinct of motherhood, and unconditional love for her husband are the real obstacles on the path

to cultivate an identity for those ladies who are rebellious. To slam the door is to turn a deaf ear to the call of motherly duty. Maternal privilege blocks the progressive march towards the formation of identity. A lady in whom a feminist awakening has come must battle against the fascinating call of motherhood to slam the door is tantamount to discarding maternal and family role. To slam the door means to decide to rise above the temptation of baser impulses like feelings and affections. To slam the door is to slam the metaphoric door of love, sentiment and affection. To slam the door is to prepare to open the new door of identity and individuality. To slam the door means to encourage the conscious women that women should partake of active revolt against male dictatorship. The actual significance of the slamming of the door lies in the presentation of the fact that even such an ignorant and submissive wife Nora go to the violent level of launching an active revolt against male domination and dictatorship. Its metaphoric significance emerges from the fact that the slamming of the door stands for the optimistic emergence of a new revolution that is called feminism.

### 3.Nora in A Doll's House

Nora, the protagonist of Ibsen's problem play A Doll's House takes the bold decision to abandon her husband and children at the end of the play not primarily to be free from marital life marked by domination of her husband, but to educate herself so that she can stand on her own thereby enabling herself to establish her personal identity and to develop a sense of an individual.

As the play opens, we find Nora as a passive recipient of whatever treatment is meted out to her. Her husband is always trying to impose his will on her and she is expected to behave the way he wants her to. She cannot eat the things she likes and cannot spend money at her will. She is expected to conduct herself as told by her husband. Helmer treats her as his personal property. She has no sense of individuality. Before marriage, she was controlled by her father and after marriage; she was under the control of her husband. She moves as gestures by the norms of the patriarchal society. She is no better than a childbearing machine confined within the four walls of the house. Her husband and his status are a source of her identity. She has nothing to pride on as an individual. The adjectives Helmer uses to address Nora are an indication of how she is seen by her husband. She is his squirrel and skylark. She is no more than an object existing solely for

the pleasure of her husband. Things happen to her and she can't make things happen. She has to follow the dictates and whims of her domineering husband.

A dutiful and loyal wife as she is, she forges a signature to get money to arrange for her husband's treatment. The fact that she has borrowed money without asking for her husband's permission wouldn't be acceptable to Helmer. She decides to keep the matter a secret. After this she is always haunted by a fear of being exposed. Krogstad's threats to reveal the matter to her husband if she doesn't act on his behalf add to her psychological suffering. Her husband doesn't entertain the presence of dishonest Krogstad and chides her as he finds Krogstad visiting their house. Nora is waiting for miracles to happen. She is hopeful that no matter what happens her husband will come to her rescue. However, when her act of forgery is revealed to Helmer, all his pretensions to love Nora are exposed and he comes out in his true colors. This is one of the greatest turning points in the play as it helps to see the disillusionment dawn upon Nora. After Krogstad took back the charge through a letter, Helmer feels safe and enacts a drama of a loving husband again. Nora now knows who her husband really is and decides to leave home and go away from a relation which has meant only suffering and humiliation for her. She finds no point in continuing to live with a person who always places his dignity and status above his love and care for his wife. His hypocrisies are no longer hidden from Nora.

Nora's decision to leave her husband does not arise from a need to seek freedom from her status as a mother and a wife, more importantly, it stems from a need to establish her identity as a person. All along she had depended upon her husband basically due to the lack of education and the firsthand knowledge of the world. She quits her husband and children because she feels that her duty towards herself as an individual is more important than her duties as a wife and a mother. First and foremost, she is an individual and educating herself and becoming an individual in her own right is above everything else. It is for establishing her identity as an individual; she feels the need to leave her home and family.

Nora's decision at the end is intended to show that a man has no business to treat his wife as an item of his property or as a possession of his. A woman has a mind of her own, and an individuality of her own. She needs a favorable environment in which she can think for herself and can make her own wishes known to her husband. She should not be taken for granted by her husband.

Helmer has shown himself to be a complete egoist, a self-centered man, a self-complacent husband who thinks that a wife is intended to be a source of warmth and comfort in the household and that all that matters is the husband's ideas, opinions, and tastes to which a wife must conform. Nora, by her bold action at the end, shows that she is not the conformist type of wife or that she has been a conformist for too long a time and that she is not prepared to continue in that role.

The first and final serious talk between Nora and Helmer represents a reversal in their previous roles. Now Nora takes the lead, forcing Helmer to look at their marriage from a totally-new angle. Her discussion of her position reveals an intuitive intelligence which has led her to connive at her own oppression since this had seemed the easiest way to a comfortable life. Faced with the most uncomfortable reality of the social, religious, and moral codes which her husband represents, her energy and love of life come into their own. She can no longer love Helmer for he is not the man she had believed him to be. Despite his attempts to persuade her to stay, or at least remain in contact with him, she no longer believes in miracles. Handing back her wedding ring, the symbol of their marriage, she leaves, her claim for independence complete. As the sound of the slammed street door reverberates, she escapes to face the challenge of reality, a challenge which she is at least prepared to face, although she may be ill equipped to win the fight.

She is developing a character and evolves into a rebellious person towards the end of the play. It is exactly what she needs to be an individual and asserts her identity.

#### 4.Parallelism and Contrast in A Doll's House

Putting characters or situation in contrast, is a technique of plot design known as juxtaposition. For this, certain characters and situations are also made comparable or parallel by making them similar. In this way, comparable characters make the contrasts even more striking.

In *A Doll's House*, Nora is contrasted against Mrs. Linde, and Helmer is opposite to Krogstad. Rank is also somehow similar to Nora.

The most striking contrast is between Nora and Mrs. Linde. Nora is a happy wife in the beginning and turns out to be a tragic character at the end of the drama; Mrs. Linde is a tragic widow at first but she later becomes smugly satisfied wife of Krogstad at the end. Nora seems to

be a plaything, a beautiful and interesting object of entertainment at first, but she turns out to be actually capable of thinking, seeking her identity and dignity, and she leaves her house at the end of the play. Mrs. Linde is a serious and independent woman, a grave lady living a listless life in the beginning, but she manages to find the role of a romantic young wife, happily dependent on her man. Nora is a symbol of revolution, poor Mrs. Linde, who will never understand so difficult ideas like 'dignity' is the stereotypical representative of the conservative woman. Nora stands for the future, Mrs. Linde stands for the past. The only one parallel between these two women is that Mrs. Linde also told lies to her lover, like Nora tells lies to her husband, to save the life of her mother and help her brothers. Nora looks very young and attractive, but Mrs. Linde looks middle-aged and pale. Nora has three children, some property and a possessive husband, but Mrs. Linde has none of them. And, if Nora walks out, leaving all that, Mrs. Linde walks in, eager to have them. Nora goes to fight the unknown, Mrs. Linde comes to get a security so that she can stop fighting for a living.

Torvald Helmer is contrasted with Krogstad. Though Helmer is a school friend of Krogstad, he is conservative and rigid, unsympathetic egoistic. Krogstad is supposed to be the villain of the play in and conventional terms, but he is sympathetic in feeling, progressive in thought, flexible in attitude and not rigid in his opinions. It is surprising that Krogstad collies to see whether Nora is too worried after his blackmailing. He comes and tells Nora that his intention is only to get his job back by blackmailing her husband, who has been so heartless that he has fired his schoolmate without genuine reason. He clearly tells Nora: "Mrs. Helmer, I've been thinking about you all day. Even duns and hack journalists have hearts, you know." He loves Nora, as a human being, and wants to tell her that he doesn't want to harm her. But, Helmer, who is supposed to love Nora, is heartless. No one can forgive such a hypocrite who scolds his loving wife so bitterly and gets ready to disown her when his prestige is slightly threatened. He is so conservative, narrow-minded, fake idealist, and corrupted that he decides to dismiss his friend from the job because he is addressed by his, first name; even worse, he makes a pretension that Krogstad is immoral and corrupt, when he actually tells the actual reason to his wife. If Helmer decides to disown his loving wife because of ego, Krogstad decides to marry a widow because of love. Helmer is disgustingly inhuman; Krogstad melts our heart with his humanity.

There are minor parallels and contrasts other than the above, like the contrast between Dr. Rank and Helmer, and the slight parallel between Nora and Krogstad. Dr. Rank contrasts with Helmer in that he is homeless and unhappy, whereas Helmer has a home and family and is the master of it. Dr. Rank is sick, Helmer is healthy. Dr. Rank is frank and even revolutionary in his sexual attitudes, whereas Helmer is a terribly conservative killjoy. Helmer is sensitive about self-respect and social status, whereas Dr. Rank takes life like a joke. Another minor contrast is between Nora and Dr. Rank. If Dr. Rank is a symbol of death and decay, Nora is a symbol of life and exuberance, change and revolution. But there is also a slight comparison between them in the sense that both Nora and Dr. Rank have inherited something from their parents: Nora has got her lavish nature from her father, and Rank has inherited his tuberculosis which is said to be the result of his father's recklessness.

Finally, there is some similarity between Nora and Nils Krogstad in the sense that both of them have committed forgery for the sake of their family. In fact, both Nora and Krogstad are liberal thinkers and are also progressive. They both have a human heart.

### **5. The Plot Construction in A Doll's House**

Unlike the traditional five-act plays, A Doll's House is written in three acts. The plot is also constructed on the basis of retrospection, going back into the past for information and understanding. Besides, the plot is also designed with extreme care for the economy and other dramatic effects.

The dramatist has maintained the unities, though not strictly, and he has sustained credibility and interest.

The three acts in which the plot of the drama is constructed may be analyzed as acts of exposition, complication and resolution respectively. The inciting event happens side by side with the exposition in the first act; the second act includes rising action along with complication; and the last act performs the function of resolution as soon as the reversal and catastrophe take place.

The plot-construction of the play is also characterized by economy and focus. Nothing is repeated, and nothing is too elaborate. The past is revealed in the dialogues, especially in the first act. But, what is unique about the exposition of this drama is that the necessary revelation of the past is done almost until the end of it!



Another technique in the plot-design of this play is its retrospective technique of exposition. This means that the dramatist has revealed the reality of the past as the drama develops. The dialogues in the play reveal to us the story of the last eight years in the life of the main characters. If the dialogue between Nora and Helmer in the opening scene informs us of the basic situation of their romantic-looking married life, it also builds an atmosphere of slight tension, because Helmer is rather too possessive towards Nora. The conversation between Nora and Mrs. Linde is mainly there for the revelation of their past lives: Nora has done something secretly, and Linde has suffered due to poverty. The entry of Krogstad and his talk with Nora opens up the secret of her pride as a threat to her happiness, because she has committed a forgery in her ignorance. That becomes the inciting event and it builds sufficient dramatic tension. This secret is fully revealed when Nora talks to Mrs. Linde in the second act. The third act also has some minor pieces of information about the past, like the love affair between Krogstad and Mrs. Linde.

The dramatist has maintained the three unities to some extent. There is full unity of place because all the actions take place in the house of Mr. Helmer. We are only told that some of the actions, like the ball dance, take place off-stage. But Ibsen has made the time-scheme flexible. The play takes a little more than two days to complete. If the first act takes place on the eve of (the day before) Christmas, and the second act takes place in the evening after the celebration of Christmas, the third act takes place later that night. The action has less unity. The main line of action in the play is related to the married life of the two central characters Nora and Torvald, but there is another sub-plot related to Krogstad and Mrs. Linde. Their story is almost separate and complete in itself. But, Ibsen has cleverly incorporated the sub-plot with the main plot: the happiness in Krogstad life brought about by Mrs. Linde's proposal for marriage brings the most important turning point in the life of the main characters, and thus in the main plot of the play.

There are many other techniques and features in the construction of this play. Some of them are as follows: the rapid pace of actions, the intensity of feelings aroused by them, the power of language, of the dialogue, the natural action and setting, the use of the comic scenes, the use of symbolic images and actions, and a very dramatic ending.

## 6. The Significance of the Title A Doll's House

The title of A Doll's House is symbolically significant as well as highly suggestive of the message that Ibsen seems to have intended to convey through the play. There are two important aspects of the play, which the title directly points to: the doll and the house.

The doll represents Nora the central character, and the house stands for the house of Helmer where Nora lives.

If we read the play carefully and understand it critically, we feel that the word "doll" has been used in the title in a rather ironic manner. "Doll" signifies passivity, beauty, and the basically feminine nature which is seen in Nora when we look at her from outside. Indeed, from the viewpoint of Helmer, who is basically a traditionally possessive husband, Nora the doll is something like an inanimate object with which he can play and enjoy. As Nora says at the end of the play, she had been her father's doll until her marriage and she has been Helmer's doll for eight long years since her marriage. The word 'doll' suits Nora if we look at her with the traditional or uncritical eye, as Helmer or Mrs. Linde would look, or rather as they would like Nora to be. The reality is however that Nora has all the potential of being a real human being, seeking identity and dignity, and conscious of all the limitations imposed by her husband and his society's traditions. Nora is not a real doll but an apparent one. She is subservient; she is designed as per the demand and desires of Helmer, who would like to think that he makes her what he wants her to be; she is also perfect and unchanging, insentient and easy to handle like lifeless dolls, that is, in the eyes of Mr. Helmer. Her opinions and interests are fully determined and controlled by him. She is his doll, like she was her father's doll till marriage, Helmer possesses her, basically and almost only for fun. Nora has herself explained the fun that her husband obtained while their playhouse.

*"...But our home has never been anything but a playroom, I've been your doll-wife, just as I used to be Papa's doll-child. And the children have been my dolls. I used to think it was fun when you came in and played with me, just as they think it's fun when I go in and play games with them. That's all our marriage has been.... "*

Another ironic indication in the use of the word "doll's" is that the house does not belong to the doll. Nor is it made or maintained for her. The house, not home, is Mr. Torvald Helmer's. In one sense, he possesses the house, along with the doll! The house, therefore, seems to belong to the doll; but actually it is her cage. We say that the cover of a book belongs to it, or that it is the

book's cover. It is only in that sense that the house belongs to the doll. Thus, Nora is the doll, and the house is a cage or 'case' for her. Indeed, the theme of the play suggests that her house (or home, or family) is a limitation on her freedom and prospects of life.

The word "house" also has symbolic suggestions and thematically significant connotations. "House", as contrasted to "home", means 'a structure or shelter to live in', unlike "home" which means 'a house where one's family lives and one gets love and care'. "Home" is an emotively charged word, whereas "house" is not. So, in the case of the title of this play, the word 'house' as the connotation of 'just a place to live in', 'a shelter', 'a lifeless thing', and so on. Indeed, for Nora, the house of Helmer has never been a home; it has been a house. As we see her in the beginning, Nora is mainly satisfied with her living place, her house; so, it is her 'home' indeed. But, as she finds out later, it has been a house, a cage, she has been living there as a plaything until her expectation of an act of, sacrifice by her husband, or what she calls "miracle", fails to happen. When she is disillusioned about her place and value, her dignity and respect from her husband, she realizes that her husband has been treating her like a child treats its doll. She has the feeling of that home which has been like the doll's house. That is the meaning of the title. The title is thus very appropriate and is also indicative of the theme of the play.

### 7.A Doll's House as A Play of Social Criticism

A Doll's House is a play of social criticism in the sense that it has criticized the traditional marriage, man-woman relationship and the domination of the female by the male in the name of love or family. It has thrown a number of questions in the face of the so-called values that were traditionally supposed to make the family happy and the society civilized.

Ibsen has taken up the problem of marriage as an issue for this problem play; and he has exposed a number of problems inside the mask of the outwardly perfect relationship between a husband and wife. Until a woman tries to be free for deciding her preferences and following her own conscience, until she dares to be frank about her feelings, until a wife questions her loving husband why he gives her no respect, until she finds out that his love is only a form of possessing and exploiting her, and until she is disillusioned about how the 'shelter' of her husband can deprive her of all opportunities of realizing her dreams for being someone in the society, until

that moment, Nora, like many women of her time, lives in the cozy (comfortable) illusion of love from her husband. But this husband turns out to be a hypocrite and an egotist, a man who doesn't apologize even when he is made to realize how much injustice he has done to her. When a crisis comes, he is able to discard his wife as a nobody; he is able to scold her in an unimaginable manner and forget all her lifelong love and sacrifice. She is his doll, his petty possession, his material means of luxury, not even a friend or partner for life. He gives her no dignity. The woman finds out that he has been in love with his own image, and for the fun of playing with her. She brought up the children, but he thinks that they are his property. She had saved him from death, and he has no culture of saying 'thank you'; instead, he feels that it is shameful to be saved by a mere wife!

This exposure of a man's behavior and attitude towards his life-mate, his treatment and exploitation of whom a civilized world calls a 'soul-mate' is not only the exposure of a particular man's emptiness of heart and mind and culture. It is the exposure of the emptiness and poverty in the hearts of the society's collective behavior which we call it 'culture', in the neutral sense of the term. The events of the drama are extremely realistic. In fact, they had happened in reality itself. The drama was written by looking at the life and experience of a woman named Laura Kieler, who almost exactly resembles Nora.

One of the reasons why *A Doll's House* was often banned was because it was bluntly criticizing the actual society of the time, and not because it was immoral or vulgar. No doubt, it criticized the lack of justice and humanity in the treatment of women like Laura Kieler during the late 19th century. The drama is also very relevant to the situation of women in many, many parts of the world even today in the twenty-first century.

