

Review

Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Komol in Saratchandra's *Shesh Proshno*: A comparative study from feminist perspective

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Andro-centric literature hardly focused on woman repression. Very few male writers could see woman sufferings in social phenomenon with woman eyes and thereby present their distresses in literary works. Saratchandra Chattaphadhyay and Henrik Ibsen are among the few celebrated writers who claimed overwhelming applause for presenting woman question in their works with a view to restructuring social construct about woman status in society. Nora and Komol are presented in their respective works as advocates of woman rights. Nora revolts against male-formulated social structure repressing women in the name of religion, conventions, and breaks the framework set up by men and dashes for liberated life. But Komol is more ruthless in her approach. She attacks age-old beliefs both social and religious and denounces everything that denigrates humanity. A lot of criticism arises in social and literary discourses because of their blatant attitude towards traditional social mindset. This article made a feminist reading of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Saratchandra's *Shesh Proshno*, and evaluated Nora and Komol from feminist perspective. The study discovered a great commonness in both the characters—the struggle for emancipation.

Key words: Woman, struggle, emancipation, tradition, society.

INTRODUCTION

Woman position in Indian Bengali society in the nineteenth century was very deplorable. Child-marriage, polygamy and many other social injustices and religious superstitions made the situation more distressing. Saratchandra Chattapadhyay (1876-1938 A.D.), an Indian writer, emerged in the literary arena as a savior of woman rights at the end of that century. He looked into the sufferings women were undergoing. A woman, he thought, was not a mere property of her husband and an orphan girl or a helpless woman was not the sex object of the sly and wicked leaders of the society. He revolted against the view of women by the male-centric society as commodity. During his time, women were denied any

individual status as social being. Women, confined in home, were supposed to satisfy her husband's lustful desires and shoulder the burden of the family in well and woe. In society a woman did not have any identity, rather was in the possession of men. Saratchandra (2010) pointed fingers at the reasonableness of the question of possession that women, as pleasure commodity, would be decorated in the showcase like dolls. He proclaimed in his writings that woman's role in the society was not to be like a slave. She was also a human being like a man having all human attributes. He presented women in many of his works as protagonists and showed how women were persecuted and deprived of their rights.

But his reformist writing did not have any doctrinal stand except in his novel *Shesh Proshno* (The Last Question) published in 1931. In this novel, Komol, the female protagonist, sounds like the embodiment of his comprehensive revolt against society. With no hesitation whatsoever she criticizes religion, traditions, and the oppressive cultures and customs that discriminate against women. Using strongly insightful language, she stirs many with her uncompromising attitude against male domination, receiving both love and hatred from her listeners. Although the setting of this novel is Agra, the wholeness of Bengali society has been portrayed here with artistic strokes of his pen. And Komol is the end-product of his long cherished thought.

Likewise, in the eighteenth century Europe, women played no significant role in society. They were mainly assigned to cooking, cleaning, sewing, taking care of the children, and doing other household chores. They were taken to be material possessions rather than human beings capable of thinking and acting for themselves and looked upon as decorative members of the household. Married women were without property rights, husbands had so much legal power over their wives that they could even imprison or beat them with impunity. Divorce and child custody laws were against women. When women worked, they were paid a fraction of what men earned. They were denied professions such as medicine or law.

Towards the middle of the second half of the 19th century, educated middle class flourished in Europe and women started questioning the submissive behavior they had been taught. A sense of individuality developed and the awareness of self-dignity propelled them to revolt the tortures and humiliations they were undergoing; but the male dominated bourgeois society still expected them to be submissive, no matter how assertive their instinctive personality was. In that critical situation Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906 A.D.), one of the most outstanding Norwegian modern play-wrights of the 19th century Europe, came up in European literature with a promise for women. Ibsen sided with women who sought to change their traditional role. His literary career started at the second half of the 19th century with the publication of his first drama *Castiline*. Bentley (1965) said that Ibsen's plays are about rebels—from *Castiline* to *Brand* and *Julian* and from *Lona Hessel* and *Nora Helmer* to *Hedda Gabler* and *John Gabriel Borkman*. The subject matter of his plays in the second phase of his literary career was woman emancipation. His world famous play *A Doll's House*, published in 1879, is an effort to set women free from the traditional shackles they were fettered with by the male-dominated society. Nora, the female protagonist of this novel, was his spokesman who goes against the social norms and religious values. Her final closing of the door at the end of the play signifies that she is going out into the world that is full of possibilities.

Much research has been conducted on both the writer and individual, but what I found significant in these two

texts is that the female protagonists of both these texts—Nora and Komol—aspire to break the social barriers and finally both succeeded in attaining their emancipation. Ibsen (1879) and Saratchandra (2010) successfully created Nora and Komol in their respective works to represent millions of Noras and Komols around us. Why I chose these two writers of two different backgrounds and times is because they both showed equal mastery of analyzing woman psychology, and earnestness in dealing with the repression of women who struggled for some space to breathe freely. The writers' liberal humanistic approach to delineating women characters brought them to a common cause—woman emancipation. This article briefed the background of feminist criticism, and then assessed the portrayal of Nora and Komol and finally concluded with the salient features found in both Nora and Komol.

DISCUSSION

Feminist approach to literature

Feminist literary movement developed mostly since the beginning of the late twentieth century women's movement that included the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett and Betty Friedan. They studied the female construct in literature by male authors to embody various male fears and anxieties. This criticism primarily responds to the way woman is presented in literature, basically, how women are presented in literature by male writers from their own viewpoint and how women are presented in the writings of female writers from their point of view (Das, 2012). Elaine Showalter's observation about the development of this movement is noticeable: "In its earliest years, feminist criticism concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice: the literary abuse or textual harassment of women in classic and literary history" (Showalter, 1985). There are different purposes of feminist approach to literature such as "revaluing women's experience, challenging representations of women as 'other' or as 'lack' as part of nature, raising the question of whether men and women are 'essentially different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different" (Barry, 2010). A very dominant objective of this approach is to 'examine representations of women in literature by men and women'. There is huge negative estimation of Nora's psychological makeup and Komol's overbearing renunciation of social conventions and age-old beliefs, but we here re-read these characters and try to evaluate them from feminist viewpoint.

Analysis of Nora and the male dominance

Nora, the female protagonist of *The Doll's House*, acts as Ibsen's mouthpiece of the woman emancipation. Ibsen

(1879) himself said that the intention of the play was to show an individual's liberation from the shackles and restraints of society. "Its actual effects however was to show woman emancipation from the proprietary rights that a husband claims to have over his wife" (Lall, 1985). Nora's husband Helmer's dominance over her is overtly transparent from the beginning of the play *A Doll's House*. His patronizing addresses to her like 'lark', 'squirrel', 'song bird' etc. reveal his tendency to underrate Nora to be socially feeble than and inferior to him. Helmer treats her like a doll. Before her marriage she was treated by her father like a baby doll. She did not have any say; she had to comply with her father in any case. And after her marriage, her husband did not treat her for a single day as a human being. His language sounds like he is taming a wild bird. He blames Nora that she wastes away his money and thus his defaming words pierce her: "Can you deny it, Nora dear? [He puts his arm around her.] It is a sweet little lark, but it gets through a lot of money. No one would believe how much it costs a man to keep such little bird as you" (p. 28). It is as if Helmer were petting a bird to respond to his taught language. Here he chastises Nora's expectation of a rewarding life. He blames her to be a spendthrift. Actually she needs saving from the pocket money to pay the loan she borrowed from Krogstad to save her husband's life. His derogatory admonition exceeds usual decency when he questions the taste of her heredity. He insults her:

You're a strange little being! Just your father- always on the look-out for all the money you can lay hands on; but the moment you have it, it seems to slip through your fingers; you never know what becomes of it. Well, one must take you as you are. It's in the blood. Yes, Nora, that sort of thing is hereditary" (pp. 28-29).

The way Nora reacted

Nora's reaction to the debasement of her character by Helmer is mild. She satirically reacts: "I wish I had inherited many of papa's qualities" (p. 29). Nora prioritizes humanity over traditional laws and social customs. When her husband needs weather change to survive the sickness, she forges her father's signature and borrows money from Krogstad. As Krogstad threatens to disgrace Helmer's family by disclosing her forgery, she strongly defends her course of action: "I don't believe that. Do you mean to tell me that a daughter has not right to spare her dying father trouble and anxiety?—that a wife has no right to save her husband's life?" (p. 72). Linnea (1985) observed that Nora could not really see how it was wrong to forge a name in order to save a life, but Torvald would rather die than break the law or borrow money. This difference in thinking was what trapped Nora.

To Nora, saving a human life is more important than following social conventions that require too many formalities ignoring the truth that 'existence precedes

essence', that nothing is truer than humanity. Her motto is 'Let humanism be the other name of religion'. When it comes to saving her husband's life, she needs to arrange money immediately. She cannot increase the anxiety of her father by letting him know the bad health condition of her husband. Here Krogstad wants to take advantage from her helplessness by threats and tricks. If some sense of guilt or corruption crosses Nora's mind, it is the bourgeois society that is responsible for this. This society is liable for inculcating the pricks of undue conscience in her mind. Her obstinate insisting Helmer on retaining Krogstad's job results from her desire to see the family happy. Northam (1965: 103) pictures the undercurrent of Nora:

Nora is almost hysterical with terror at the thought of her situation—almost, but it is part of her character that with great heroism she keeps her fears secret to herself; and it is because of her reticence that Rank is dramatically necessary to symbolize the horror she will not talk about. . . .

Nora and the male bullying

Helmer's sweet words prove false when he fails to stand the test of a miracle which he time and again spoke of. After reading Krogstad's black-mailing letter, he explodes into vulgar rage—he calls his wife a hypocrite, a liar, a criminal; he throws her father into her face. A sensible husband cannot behave towards his wife in such a beastly way as he did, no matter what the offence she has committed. He has every right to quiz the reason why she has borrowed money from Krogstad in absence of his knowledge. Helmer does not do that. Nora tries to share this part of her life with her husband in several times but finds no serious moments to share serious matters with him because he never takes her to be a serious being. Now his vulgar behavior opens her eyes. She comes to realize that her existence is nothing more than a doll, just transferred from one's hands to others'. Her husband's imposing character no more soothes her burning soul that urges her to burst out: "I mean I passed from father's hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your taste; and I got the same taste as you; . . . You and father have done me a great wrong. It is your fault that my life has come to nothing." (p. 163).

Nora's final reaction

Now Nora is outspoken. She realizes that their home was nothing but a mere 'playroom'. She has been treated like a doll-wife as she used to be her father's doll-child. She no longer wants to be instrumental to this game. She wants to break the fetters of illusion. Her husband fails to pacify her tormented soul. She is not bothered about

what the world will say if she forsakes her home, husband and children. She discovers her identity to be a human being. If she has some holy duties to her husband and children, she has holier duties to herself as a human being. Now she denies her identity as a wife and mother, "That I no longer believe. I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are—or at least that I should try to become one" (p. 167).

Even she refutes the previously held views about religion. Her denial of the conventional religion at the end finds repose in the belief that saving life is the greatest religion. A sense of shock is explicit in her language when she says, "It appears that a woman has not right to spare her dying father, or to save her husband's life! I don't believe that". In a male-dominated society, realizes Nora at last, husbands shower their love and affection to their wives only to be satisfied at thinking that they are able, but 'no man sacrifices his honor, even for one he loves' (p. 172). Nora responds that millions of women sacrifice their honor for their husbands. She has done everything possible to entertain Helmer's wishes and raise the children up. Finally she realizes that she has been living in illusion; and one does not die for illusions if one recognizes them. The realization she has undergone is shocking to her. It is the male-dominated society that has undermined her to a stultifying life. The males' projection of women is the real crime, the real corruption as she clearly sees, not her forging or her little lies. The real criminality lies in the male conspiracy to debase the female. It is the Doll House attitude that is the corruption which must not be transmitted. She must go into a hostile world and educate herself. Helmer's society leaves Nora no alternative to plunging into the ocean of uncertainty so as to grope for cruel emancipation.

Komol and her renunciation of age-old beliefs

And Komol is a meditated creation of Shoratchandra Chattapathay, by which he attacks the very foundation of Indian age-old beliefs. He successfully created her so as to expose the follies and frivolities that prevail in society in the name 'traditional' and 'religious'. To begin with, she shatters the very idea of permanent love. She does not believe in permanent love. She holds that forward movement is the nature of truth and persisting in the tradition is the nature of disease. We discover the nature of her liberated mind at the very beginning of her debate with Ashu Babu when she speaks disparagingly of the sincerity of Shah Jahan's love for his wife Momtaz and his creation of Tajmohol. She says:

The Emperor was a reflective man, a poet. He built such a fantastically giant architecture with his power, wealth and patience. Momtaz was a surprise occasion. . . . It is not the gift of sincere love; rather it is the un-eroded gift of the Emperor's self aesthetic dimension. (p. 23, trans. by the researcher)

Komol ruthlessly attacks long-practiced beliefs and social habits. She herself is educated, well-behaved and free from prejudices. That is why she can tell the truth about his mother with ease, "Mother had beauty, but not taste" (p. 43, trans. by the researcher).

Komol depreciates Ashu Babu's remaining a widower. Even she cannot concede women's widow-ship for the rest of their life. It is, says Komol, meaningless to suffer a single life by recollecting the past. She argues, "The object of love is lost; only remains the memory of the incident that one loved the other. Man is gone; only memory survives. And one nurses this memory in mind day and night, I don't know what ideals lurk in focusing the past over the present" (p. 25, trans. by me). To Komol, the practice of remaining single after the husband's death is not temperance or an emblem of the aspiration for truth, as Ashu Babu sees it; rather it is a means of self-affliction that ruins the potentials of life, that is, the capacity to live the life. She criticizes the culture of regression and finding consolation in recollecting the past instead of looking forward and starting life anew. That is why Komol does not lose heart even after Shiva Nath has forsaken her. Her stoic endurance of separation with her husband gives women an impetus to living life after the same experience in their life. She says, "The mind that cannot look forward and that is paralyzed and lifeless wants to survive in the past by ignoring all future hopes" (p. 26, trans. by me). Mitra (1981) rightly comments on Komol, "The dynamism of life and extreme belief in the future made the character Komol lively and resonant" (trans. by me). The present is the truth and the future is her hope. Her statement to Ajit proves this, "Let me take what I get in the present to be the truth and do not let the ignition of sorrows exhaust the dewdrops of bygone happiness" (p. 38, trans. by me). The thought of her biological entity to be female has not come in the way of her facing the world so boldly. But Basu (1976) is a bit critical about her anti-feminine disposition. He fails to come out from the andocentric views of women. He satirizes her bold person:

Komol is the worshiper of immediate pleasure. She believes in the movement of life. The readers' minds pity on the absence of the cuteness of her femininity; the flower of love in her heart has never been bloomed. She could love neither Shiva Nath nor Ajit. Who is more wretched than Komol in whose heart has not flourished a loving self of woman? (p. 163, trans. by the researcher)

Bourgeois society always expects women to be cute, submissive and satisfying men's desires. The aforementioned critic is not an exception. Love between man and woman, sees Komol, is nothing but a social behavior. This relation develops on the basis of equal rights and equal economic status. In bourgeois social structure, woman is identified merely as a production machine. Woman's honor will remain a far cry until she can be

emancipated from this disgrace. We see how the whole class of vested interest protests Komol when she speaks of the social prejudices. For this reason, Komol's thought and life-style is unbearable to the male characters like Abinash Babu and Ashu Babu.

Komol does not spare the foundational beliefs of monastic system in India. She denounces self-affliction of widowed and monastic life in the name of moderation and questions the way children were brought up in the monastery, "Is this unproductive practice of poverty to be preparing men for serving humanity, Mr. Horen Babu? If you want to build them up, follow usual course. Why do you break their back-bones by the burden of untold sufferings?" (p. 66, trans. by the researcher).

Komol argues that these children, after they grow up, cannot contribute to the construction of the society and the happiness of the people while they themselves have suffered deprivation and self-deception in their real life. Her speech reveals unanimous aspiration of humanity, "We are not to disclaim mundane life and live a monastic one. Our devotion is to live a consummated life with whole enrichment, beauty and the life of the world." (trans. by the researcher).

Her moral, social and religious stance could not satisfy all readers. Her views of marriage customs and other social practices seemed shocking to some critics. Gush (1993) comments that Komol is a worshiper of the god of appetites, sunk deep down in the pleasure of youth.

Here the critic misses the point of her speech that her body is full of youth and that her mind has life. We see Komol's life is very austere and commonplace; her food habit is very simple. She politely declines luxurious food in Ashu Babu and Abunash Babu's houses. Her humanitarian character is evident when we see her treat the people afflicted by dengue epidemic. She treats Shiva Nath during his illness, forgetting about the breach of their relation.

Her sincere effort to convince Ashu Babu to consent to Monorama's marriage with Shiva Nath is a testimony to her struggle for women emancipation. She persuades, "I never forget the truth that the real authority to emancipate women is at the hands of men, no matter how much protest they undertake for liberty. . . . Likewise, man can give woman emancipation." (p. 139).

Although Komol is highly critical about social norms and conventions, her endeavor for woman rights resonates throughout the novel. Saratchandra wanted to present Komol as a truth-seeker with whose speech he tried to bridge his own life (Mukhapadhyay, 1976).

CONCLUSION

The great affinity between Nora and Komol is that both revolt against male-dominated society, but they are different in their rebellious approaches. From the beginning to the end of *Shesh Proshno* we see Komol's

blatant denial of social values, whereas Nora's protest is implicit and very soft at first, though her final closing the door and leaving Helmer forever is a slap at the face of bourgeois' male dominated social beliefs.

Komol is a more comprehensive character than Nora. Nora's revolt appears evident after her right to be respected was denied by Helmer, but *Shesh Proshno* starts with Komol's rebellious campaign. Saratchandra attained his educational goal by Komol. She does not require any impetus to stand against the social order. She was preplanned by the author and set before the characters that she fights to logically prove that women are also a part of human species and that they should also be treated as human beings.

Helmer's misdemeanor turns Nora a rebel to the androcentric society. Her gradual realization of self-identity finally leads her out from the family. She is characterized by her intense emotion whereas Komol is characterized by her emotional intelligence. Nora's slamming the door and rushing towards uncertainty may seem cruel, but she had no other alternative to this for surviving the disgrace she received from her husband. Nora leaves the family and seeks salvation outside whereas Komol lives in the male-dominated society and attempts to reshuffle it by arousing awareness of the educated people. Nora leaves her room for other women to inhabit while Komol ensures her existence in the society and advocates others' rights as well. Nora renounces her family, husband, children, religion and everything to explore the space that women can enjoy whereas Komol has already experienced her capacities and still continues to maximize them; her mission is to uphold universal humanity. Both's aspiration for salvation opens our eyes to see the woman world around anew.

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