Nora's Defiant Space-Making: Questioning and Reshaping Narratives in *A Doll's House*

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Abstract

This paper examines Nora of A Doll's House through a spatial lens, focusing on her critique of entrenched practices and institutions that perpetuate patriarchal norms, highlighting the necessity for reform, change and transformation to achieve authentic agency for women. The study investigates how Nora, from her marginalized position, navigates and responds to her oppression through her space-making strategies. Her final confrontation, marked by dialogic engagement rather than mediation, intensifies her awareness of oppression and solidifies her resolve to redefine her space. Nora's articulation of her position within the social structure and her decisive actions in the play's climax are often interpreted as acts of rebellion, particularly symbolized by the iconic slamming of the door. This defiant act transcends the domestic sphere, challenging and redefining the spaces women occupy, while offering broader insights into societal and cultural transformations. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of spatiality specially of Doreen Massey's spatial insights, this paper analyses Nora's questioning and defiance as deliberate space-making efforts that extend beyond domestic, societal and national boundaries, underscoring their global relevance for women in patriarchal societies.

Keywords: A Doll's House, Nora, space-making, patriarchy, marginalization, defiance, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, bell hooks

1. Introduction

Henrik Ibsen's declaration in The Pillar of Society that "the spirit of truth and the spirit of freedom – they are the pillars of society" (p. 119) encapsulates the central ethos of his middle and later plays. For Ibsen, the Romantic ideal of "all or nothing" represents an uncompromising moral stance, but he firmly believed that "the insistence on living in truth despite hardships has become a yardstick to measure the moral courage of an individual at both personal and social levels. To live in truth is the only way to keep one away from falsities in life" (Tam, p. 180). This unwavering commitment to truth and freedom underpins much of his work, particularly his exploration of societal norms and individual agency. And the truth Ibsen has explored in A Doll's House through Nora results from her space making strategies as multiple issues are covered here. Fodstad observes, "At the heart of the gender and family issues in A Doll's House, we find questions of economic

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responsibility and dependency, financial law, forgery, and modern banking" (p. 110).

To come to a rebellious stance of a female protagonist, the playwright routes through the surroundings, comprehends the necessity of female's space making efforts and evolves in his position. Ibsen's evolving perspective on women's roles is a defining feature of his plays. As Finney observes, his works demonstrate a profound "sensitivity to feminist issues" (p. 92), featuring "emancipated women characters" (p. 96) and advocating "the belief that a woman's mind and body are hers to control as she wishes" (p. 103). Templeton further emphasizes that "Nora's doll house and exit from it have long been principal international symbols for women's issues" (p. 111). While Ibsen initially held conservative views on women, his outlook shifted in response to the socio-political transformations of his time. The publication of John Stuart Mill's The Subjection of Women in 1869 and the rise of feminist movements, including the 1878 Paris gathering of American and European feminists, significantly influenced him. Additionally, his friendship with Camilla Collett, a prominent feminist and author, played a crucial role in shaping his views. Their discussions in Munich, particularly in the years leading up to the play's publication, are reflected in its nuanced engagement with women's rights and autonomy. As Orjasæter notes, "he addressed women's complex quest for freedom in the late 1870s … Ibsen slowly reached a new point of view on women, which he demonstrates in A Doll's House" (p. 19). Through the female protagonist, the playwright has articulated his position and elevated her to a height that touches all the corners of the global theatres.

It is undeniable that Nora's stride towards space making earns her significance as a global literary figure. As Holledge asserts, "Nora rivals Antigone, Medea, and Juliet, as the most performed, discussed, and debated female character on the international stage" (p. 13). While initial interpretations of A Doll's House sparked controversy, it is now widely accepted that "to describe A Doll's House as a drama in favour of women's rights is no longer controversial" and that "the struggles experienced by his characters are still relevant and that the dramatist has something useful to say to a modern audience" (Stetz, p. 150). Nora's journey marks a pivotal moment in the emergence of modern consciousness. Ibsen employs innovative dramatic techniques, such as the monologue, to delve into the subtleties of her inner world. As Arntzen and Braenne Bjørnstad explain, "The monologue in A Doll's House is a medium for thoughts and emotions that have not yet found appropriate linguistic form, and Ibsen seems to investigate a more rough, unpolished, broken, incoherently fragmented language that partially anticipates or points forward to the modernist language of twentieth-century prose and stream of consciousness" (p. 121). This groundbreaking use of language not only captures

Nora's psychological complexity but also underscores her struggle for self-realization, making her a timeless symbol of defiance and transformation. Through Nora, Ibsen not only critiques the patriarchal structures of his time but also anticipates the modernist as well as postmodernist exploration of identity and agency. Her story continues to resonate, offering profound insights into the enduring quest for truth, freedom, and self-determination. All these issues implicate the strategies Nora adopts in making space for her emancipation from within the patriarchal society.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

Ross (1988) observes in Rimbaud that he takes us "to conceive of space not as a static reality, but as active, generative, to experience space as created by an interaction, as something that our bodies reactivate, and that through this reactivation, in turn modifies and transforms us" creating a "'non-passive' spatiality – space as a specific form of operations and interactions" (Ross, 1988, cited in Gregory p. 9). Ibsen too creates through Nora's interaction non-passive spatiality that is creative and open ended, and has the potentials to transform the existing structures particularly of the family place. Again, places are not, Massey (1991) puts, confined to unique 'identities', rather they have internal differences as well as conflicts. According to her, space is "the product of interrelations" and so it is "always under construction" (2005, p.9). Her idea of "power geometry of space-time compression" (1994, p. 149) can be handy in understanding power relations in human interactions. She clarifies her position on power geometry thus,

> Now I want to make one simple point here, and that is about what one might call the power geometry of it all; the power geometry of time-space compression. For different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn't, although that is an important element of it; it is also about power in relation to the flows and the movement. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it (1994, p. 61).

This is thus not close ended, rather it keeps open the interplay of the interactions and implies to the potentials of changes as there are the implications of politics. Brown, Browne and Lim (2007) while analysing politics in relation to sexual identities and spaces argue that, "power might be understood as myriad entanglements of resistance and domination that are mutually constitutive of each other. Power operates through how we interact with one another, how we regulate

each other's behaviour and consequently make the spaces that we inhabit" (p.5). Nora goes ahead to make her space through her dialogic interaction with her husband and others related to her.

3. Nora's Space Making Strategies

Ibsen is apt at converging multiple perspectives and issues and manifestly says a lot and implies to more in-between. As a result, Critchley observes, "When I read Ibsen, I always hear noises, not the noises of the words, but the noises behind and between the words, noises that risk reducing those words to mere noises, to birdsong" (p. 132). Nora and Helmar have their chemistry working well manifestly for a long and it is its aesthetic manifestations. It is undesirable to deny the aesthetics in their conjugal life where "they develop pictorial representations, scenic doubling of themselves and of each other" and they have their time of enjoyment and consummation when "Passion becomes the exchange of images, its arena arises where body, gaze and fantasy meet" (Osterud, p. 147). But that fails to fill the vacuum created for the binary of the dominating and the dominated in the representations of Nora and Helmar, and that gives her poor picture of him as a saviour as she says, "I have waited so patiently for eight years" (p. 78) and has found no potential change. When she is held back from committing suicide, she clearly says, "You shan't save me, Torvald" (p.70), but she has never been miser in her contribution, "I have loved you above everything else in the world" (p.70). Despite the tragic turn, Torvald continues his poor opinion of her and tells her to show, "No tragic airs" and imposes his position, "you shall stay and give me an explanation" (p.70). This paves the way for further consideration and re-evaluation of the relation dynamics and she articulates, "now I am beginning to understand thoroughly" (p. 71). To suppress her, the patriarch comes out with his tools of accusation, and underestimation terming her 'miserable creature', 'liar', 'hypocrite', 'criminal', 'thoughtless' woman with "No religion, no morality, no sense of duty", and prescribes for her the future course of life and defines her duties, "And as for you and me, it must appear as if everything between us were just as before — but naturally only in the eyes of the world. You will still remain in my house, that is a matter of course. But I shall not allow you to bring up the children; I dare not trust them to you" (p.71). He also offers to shape her in future too, "I will advise you and direct you" (p.73) as unlike the scholars, he has the doubt about her heading towards the risk space, "Since its very first performance and for more than a century, A Doll's House has for its critics, scholars and beholder raised the inevitable question: "Where did Nora go?"" (Langas, p.148).

Nora with her assessment of eight years of conjugal life along with the sugar-coated addresses like 'little songbird', 'little squirrel', 'sweet little

spendthrift', 'sweet little Nora', 'little rogue', 'sweet little person' and the newer face of the patriarch finds herself with resolution to redefine her space which extends far beyond the confines of the domestic sphere, challenging the boundaries imposed upon her with "so clear and certain" mind (p.77). Throughout her seemingly idyllic married life, she gradually realizes that the dynamics within her household are not merely reflections of familial relationships but are deeply intertwined with broader social practices, legal frameworks (such as the Napoleonic Code prevalent in Victorian Europe) and cultural norms. Through her limited education and lived experiences, Nora comes to understand that the laws governing society have been crafted without the inclusion or consideration of women as stakeholders. These laws, she recognizes, have been imposed upon women rather than developed through dialogue or with their interests in mind, and so she voices her position, "I find it impossible to convince myself that the law is right. According to it a woman has no right to spare her old dying father, or to save her husband's life. I can't believe that" (p.77). As a result, many rules and regulations are enforced without addressing the essential perspectives of women, effectively restricting their agency and confining them to roles dictated by patriarchal structures. This systemic oppression reduces women to mere objects or 'dolls', perpetuating their commodification. The dominant forces in society employ various tools, techniques and strategies to maintain their power, silencing emerging voices and ensuring the deliberate exclusion of women from meaningful participation. The Napoleonic Code, while progressive in advancing certain legal rights for the general population, simultaneously reinforced restrictions on women's rights, particularly in terms of property ownership and personal autonomy. This legal framework, rather than empowering women, relegated them to the status of objects under the male gaze, stripping them of their agency. Even Nora, a housewife seemingly pampered and rendered passive by her husband, recognizes the inherent flaws in these laws and the need to question them. Her political awakening, though not rooted in formal education, becomes a powerful act of defiance. Nora's space-making efforts underscore the possibility of challenging entrenched societal norms, demonstrating that such questioning can emerge from lived experience rather than academic knowledge. Her actions shake the foundations of established systems, proving that resistance and transformation can arise even from those traditionally marginalized and silenced, and this ushers a possibility of the multiple emergences of the voices elevating herself to the position of a pioneer in women's rights.

Nora further challenges the dominant discourses by scrutinizing the books written, disseminated and upheld by patriarchal systems. These texts, she realizes, serve as instruments that normalize male dominance and perpetuate the subjugation of women in society, and so her assessment is, "I know quite well, Torvald, that most people would think you right, and that views of that kind are to

be found in books; but I can no longer content myself with what most people say, or with what is found in books. I must think over things for myself and get to understand them" (p.77). By questioning the authority of these books, the knowledge they propagate, and the societal practices they reinforce, Nora calls for a transformative shift. Her demand for change is not merely a critique but an active effort to carve out her own space. In doing so, she aligns with a strategy reminiscent of what French feminist Hélène Cixous terms écriture feminine which is a form of expression that seeks to create a language uniquely suited to women, one that embraces different diction and structures capable of authentically conveying women's experiences. Colney in her book Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine states, "To change existing social structures, the linguistic clichés that purvey them and make them appear as transparent, immutable truths must be detected, re-marked, displaced" (p. 4). Nora searches for these linguistic truths to be detected and displaced.

Nora's space-making efforts extend beyond challenging the epistemological foundations of patriarchal society. She also boldly ventures into the religious domain, a sphere traditionally controlled and monopolized by priests and clergymen who propagate fear of divine punishment and the grim realities of the afterlife. She has her assessment of how religion is projected and passed down to the common people like her, "I know nothing but what the clergyman said, when I went to be confirmed. He told us that religion was this, and that, and the other" (p.77). Unafraid of being labelled sacrilegious, Nora courageously questions the religious narratives dominated by patriarchal figures who often prioritize their own authority. She takes the audacious step of interrogating divine principles propagated by the clergymen, and wants to understand herself, "When I am away from all this, and am alone, I will look into that matter too. I will see if what the clergyman said is true, or at all events if it is true for me" (p.77). Thus, she chooses to seek her own understanding of religion's stance on women's rights rather than accepting dogma at face value. This shocks the patriarch so hard that Torvald exclaims, "This is unheard of in a girl of your age!" (p.77). By challenging the unquestioned religious practices and doctrines, Nora not only critiques the status quo but also carves out an individual space for her intellectual and spiritual growth, paving the way for her personal development and autonomy. But she expands her space even further by subverting grand narratives.

Grand narratives which rely on some forms of "transcendent and universal truth" (Lyotard, 1979, pp. xxiv–xxv) universalize local cultures and ideologies, serve as a mechanism to reinforce dominant power structures and control knowledge by presenting it as absolute and generalized. This tool is wielded by the dominant classes to embed their authority in the collective consciousness of society, particularly

marginalizing those who lack power. Torvald, as a husband, perpetuates such grand narratives by defining and imposing rigid roles for women within the domestic sphere, and the roles are based on responsibilities toward the husband and children, and so he accuses her of neglecting her "most sacred duties" and that is towards her family, husband and children (p.76). Nora, initially confined within this framework, fulfils these duties to the best of her ability. However, she soon realizes that compliance with these narratives stifles her self-fulfilment and traps her in a cycle of oppression. This realization drives her to contemplate extreme measures, such as suicide, as a way to resolve the family's crisis and ensure a smoother path for her husband and children. Yet, when she is rescued from this brink, she is confronted once again with the same oppressive expectations reiterated by Torvald. In this critical moment, Nora makes a transformative choice: she acknowledges her duties to her family but also asserts her responsibility toward herself—a self that has been overshadowed, silenced, and controlled under the dominance of her patriarchal husband. Recognizing that she has never truly existed as an individual, Nora decides to step into a 'risk-space', a realm of uncertainty and potential growth. To Durbach, the "governing idea" of the drama is "transformation" and "the doll is transformed into a sentient and self conscious human being through the ancient ritual of dance; and the fated naturalist universe is transformed into a world of creative and dynamic change by the protagonist's commitment to difficult choice and painful life decisions" (p. 134). She not only challenges the grand narratives that have confined her but also claims a larger space for her own development and autonomy. Her decision to prioritize her selfhood marks a radical departure from societal expectations, symbolizing her defiance and her commitment to reshaping her identity beyond the constraints of patriarchal domination.

In her quest to carve out her own space, Nora approaches her decision with deliberate clarity and rationality, consciously avoiding emotional impulsiveness. She resolves to leave the house, taking only what rightfully belongs to her, while firmly refusing to claim anything that is not hers. This act serves as a powerful rebuttal to the pervasive stereotype of women as inherently emotional beings, driven by sentiment rather than reason. By making this calculated and principled choice, Nora challenges the patriarchal narrative that reduces women to irrational, dependent figures. Moreover, Nora ensures her upper hand by deliberate thought that her departure does not disrupt the functioning of the household. She arranges for the children to be cared for by the maid and symbolically throws away the keys, signalling her commitment to a smooth transition even in her absence. This thoughtful and pragmatic approach not only underscores her sense of responsibility but also elevates her position, subverting the traditional notion of women as the weaker sex. Through her actions, Nora asserts her autonomy and rationality, redefining her identity beyond the confines of patriarchal expectations and

reclaiming her agency in a society that has long denied it. In her way to transformed journey and agential existence, she denies any dependence. While Torvald offers, "Let me help you if you are in want" (p. 80), she denies with a loud and clear 'no'. Whatever steps Nora takes is for freedom not only of her but also of her husband from all obligations, "I set you free from all your obligations. You are not to feel yourself bound in the slightest way, any more than I shall. There must be perfect freedom on both sides" and this perfect freedom is consummated through the reversal of material and ritual bond when she says, "See, here is your ring back. Give me mine" (p.80). Thus, Nora comes out as an agent with her space-in-the-making reverberating Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise".

4. Conclusion

Through her space making strategies, Nora advocates for a reimagined narrative that empowers women to articulate their truths and reclaim their voices. The development that she undergoes is from inside, and that engages her into the process of being and becoming as Kwok-kan Tam observes, "The change in Nora is also a psychological process from being monologic to being dialogic" (p. 86). The space making efforts on her part also entangle the financial issues with special attention, and so raises questions about it seriously in her search for self. This dialogic engagement advances her space making efforts, and she succeeds in her attempt spreading the spirit throughout the world.

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