

'Power and Inequality': A Study of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

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Abstract

Dualism as a philosophy of ecofeminism can be used as a tool to study the relationship of 'power and inequality' between individuals. This paper presents textual analysis of Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House to see how conversations between characters create dualisms that are indexical of the social status of the participants. Unlike other critiques of A Doll's House, this paper attempts to focus on the 'description of humanity'. Those in power have a right to maneuver and manipulate others who are weak. Much of the focus is on the central characters Helmer and Nora for they are representative, respectively, of society and individual. Through the conversation of these two characters, dualisms of powerful/weak, man/woman, human/woman, center/individual, objective/subjective and finally the dualism of higher/lower scales is located. These dualisms help in understanding the unequal relationship of the characters.

Keywords: *dualism; power-inequality; scale; indexicality*

1. Introduction

Debate over Ibsen being a feminist or not has been the favorite topic of the readers and critics of *A Doll's House*. This three-act play appeared in 1879, roughly about the same time when feminism as a movement was gaining roots in the globe. Ibsen however refuted the claim himself in a statement that he made on the occasion of his seventieth birthday celebration arranged by the Norwegian Women's Rights League:

I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement... True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity. (Ibsen, 1964, p. 337)

This statement can very well be taken as a defensive move by the author because the ending of the play surely signaled a "social war in all Europe" (Stratton, 1993, p. xvi). Ibsen was clearly prepared for the disturbance the play, especially the conclusion, would create so he had already thought of two different endings to the play. The desired "reverberation of a

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heavy door closing" (Ibsen, *Doll's House* 212) was incorporated much later. This conclusion was initially alternated by an independent Nora who decided to live with her family for the love of her three children (Stratton, 1931, p. xvii). However, a close reading of the text confirms author's claim about the "description of humanity."

In this paper, I locate the 'dualisms' present in the text, and by scrutinizing the dualisms, the relationship among characters is probed to see how the indexical nature of the dualisms refers to the sociocultural constructs of "power and inequality" (Blommaert, 2007a, p. 118). The study also highlights the fact that the play not only focuses on the evolution of a woman from a docile, humble, sacrificing and selfless creature to an independent, assertive and strong individual; on the contrary, the character of Nora, the heroine of the play, stands as a metaphor for the entire humanity.

Philosophy of dualism is essential to ecofeminist thought as through this philosophy the ecofeminists develop their basic argument of man/nature relationship. Val Plumwood (1993), an ecofeminist philosopher, considers dualism neither a simple dichotomy nor an ordinary set of binary oppositions. It, on the contrary, "results from a certain kind of denied dependency on a subordinated other" (p. 41). She gives a long list of dualisms starting from culture/nature and reason/nature to self/other, which eventually leads to the idea that everything related to culture and reason is 'male', 'human' and 'civilized' while everything that is related to nature is 'feminine', 'nonhuman' and 'primitive' (p. 45).

Plumwood gives certain features which are characteristic of dualism. 'Backgrounding' is a feature which explains the status of women ('others') in a patriarchal society. Like nature, they are the background or the 'environment'. The master uses the services of the others, relies upon them, takes benefit from them, and yet denies the dependence (48). 'Radical exclusion' or 'hyperseparation' is another feature of dualism. The other is not only excluded from the master model but is also hyperseparated so much so that there is a 'vacuum' between the dualised spheres (p. 50). Another important feature of dualism is 'incorporation' where the other or the inferior is defined in relation to the self and superior. Similarly 'instrumentalism' or 'objectification' is the feature which assumes the inferior to be means to the ends of the master. They have no value or worth of their own; they are useful as long as they serve the master. 'Homogenisation' or 'stereotyping' on the other hand diminishes the differences of the other: they are all alike (p. 53-54).

2. Textual Analysis

In *The Doll's House*, there are multiple sets of dualisms indexing the 'power-inequality' relationship among the characters. In the very beginning of the first act, we find Helmer calling Nora by her so-called pet names: "my lark twittering" and "squirrel frisking" (p. 122) and gradually capping it off with "what a woman you are!" (p. 123). These connotations automatically set the ground for the woman-nature connectedness, where woman as well as nature are inferior and man on the other hand is superior that represents culture in contrast. Hence, these exclamations on Helmer's part create three sets of dualisms: man/nature, man/woman, and culture/nature. Man/nature dualism indirectly indexes human/woman dualism too, for Helmer clearly treats Nora as a woman who is likened to birds and animals but not humans.

As mentioned above, the Helmer-Nora relationship indexes many dualisms. Only a few examples from the text validate the existence of the dualisms. Throughout the play, Helmer is seen to be treating Nora as his possession and as an object. The actual role that Nora played in his life is never acknowledged. She is always a 'background' to Helmer's activities. Helmer does refer to the instance when Nora spent three whole weeks to make flowers for the Christmas tree, since Helmer did not have money to buy some (p. 126). It was Helmer's responsibility as a husband to provide for Christmas arrangements; however, because of his inability to do so, Nora did her best to compensate for his inability. Instead of appreciating and acknowledging her effort, Helmer says: "But it came to little enough in the end, Nora" (p. 126). Being a woman, Nora is also conditioned to consider her part in the struggle as of little worth. Her "light fancy work: crochet, and embroidery, and things of that sort; [carelessly] and other work too" (p. 130) to financially support Helmer is 'background' to Helmer's attempts at earning money. All of her efforts are 'incorporated' into Helmer's attempts at letting both the ends meet. Her 'instrumental' value is also evident as Helmer is alive only because of her but Helmer never accepts the dependence on her even after knowing the fact. Instead of being thankful to her, he is cross with her on account of her act of forgery. Nora is never treated by Helmer as an individual. She is either treated like a pet, a doll or a woman. She is a 'stereotype' for Helmer who has no identity of her own.

There are clear parallels between Nora and all other characters of the play, except Helmer. Nora has likeness to all the other 'weak' characters whose weakness may be physical, moral or financial. She is like Krogstad for both of them have committed the same sin of forgery. She is like Dr. Rank for she too has inherited from her father her moral disease as Dr. Rank

has inherited his physical disease from his father's moral failings. She can also be compared to the Nurse for the nurse is also living without her children just as Nora is to do in future. She is like children too with whom she plays for she has also been played with like a child by her father and later her husband too. There is an absent referent Doll and there is a parallel between the Doll and Nora for she is also treated as a doll, a plaything whose only purpose is to amuse and entertain. Mrs. Linden seems to be a foil to Nora's character for she helps in understanding Nora's character more. Helmer stands as a "center" representing rules and laws of the society while almost all other characters are "individual"; hence, creating dualism of higher/lower scale².

The relationship between Nora and Helmer can be studied under the labels of 'micro' and 'macro' (Blommaert, 2007b, p. 3). Helmer being the 'center' represents what Blommaert describes as the 'macro' or higher scale—objective, universal, decontextualized and ordered, while Nora being 'individual' represents 'micro' or lower scale—personal, subjective, contextualized. Their conversation throughout indexes the semiotized scales. Scale, according to Blommaert, refers not only to timespace but it also has a social dimension to it as time and space are also socially constructed phenomena (p. 4-5). Center/individual is a consistent pair of dualisms:

[A]uthority emanates from real or perceived 'centres', to which people orient when they produce an indexical trajectory in semiosis... whenever we communicate, apart from our real and immediate addressees, we orient towards what Bakhtin called a 'superaddressee': complexes of norms and perceived appropriateness criteria, in effect the larger social and cultural body of authority into which we insert our immediate practices vis-a-vis our immediate addressees. And very often, such authorities have names, faces, a reality of their own: they can be individuals..., collectives..., abstract entities or ideals..., and so on: the macro- and micro-structures of our everyday world. The point is: we often project the presence of an evaluating authority through our interactions with immediate addressees, we behave with reference to such an evaluative authority, and I suggest we call such an evaluating authority a 'centre'. (Blommaert, 2007a, p. 118)

² The notion of 'scale', being borrowed from history and geography, refers to the fact that every social event occurs on layered time and space scale-levels which can be 'micro' (local), 'macro' (global) or in between (Blommaert, 2007b, p. 2).

For Nora, the "center" is Helmer (before the last scene). For Helmer society and religion are the center. Nora is always found to be looking forward to Helmer. For her, he represents the norms of the society. In the first scene of the play, her very act of eating macaroons and hiding it from Helmer indexes toward the sort of relationship they have. It sets the ground for the audience to expect Helmer to be the representative of the society, where it would not allow a woman to eat sweets on the expense of her beautiful teeth. Like an expert investigator, he asks several questions from her to elicit whether she has been "at the confectioner's" (p. 125). Nora's real personality also comes to the fore from the same scene when she is found to be having her own will (of eating macaroons) and yet hiding it by telling lies: "I shouldn't think of doing what you disapprove of" (p. 126).

Nora's suggestion of borrowing money is instantaneously rejected by Helmer on the ground of his "principles" (p. 122-123). "No debts! No borrowing!" (p. 123) is what Helmer has to say about this. Here Nora's suggestion of borrowing is a lower scale act. It is temporal, personal and subjective. Helmer's "principles" on the other hand are timeless, collective and objective. This scale-jump on Helmer's part is a "power move" that only he is capable of in this situation (Blommaert, Sociolinguistic Scales 5). This is indexical of another relationship between Helmer and Nora: power and inequality. The central position of Helmer allows him, not only the scale-jump, but also is indexical of his role in the society. This according to Elinor Ochs is indirect indexicality (p. 295). His calling Nora by animal names and talking to her in a very authoritative manner indirectly index his superior status as a husband as well as a male member of the society. In contrast to this, Nora's replies to Helmer indirectly index her social status too as a wife and a woman whose ideas are silly and reproachable. On Helmer's reprimand on her idea of borrowing, all she has to say is: "Very well -- as you please, Torvald" (p. 123). Conformity and hesitancy are expected features for a female member of the society.

Helmer's conversations with Nora are not only indexical of the social status of these two but also indirectly index social standing of other characters in relation to Helmer and Nora. Helmer being the 'centre' has power to generalize, to anticipate, to make rules and to determine the "footing" of the characters (Blommaert, 2007b, p. 6). Nora's deceased father is recurrently alluded to by Helmer. Her spendthrift nature always reminds Helmer of her father: "You are a strange little being! Just like your father... It's in the blood. Yes, Nora, that sort of thing is hereditary" (p. 125). These remarks by Helmer determine the social status of

Nora's father too. All her failings are in fact hereditary because she had a morally unscrupulous father. Helmer is his own yard-stick with which he measures social standing of others: "between your father and me, there is all the difference in the world. Your father was not altogether unimpeachable. I am; and I hope to remain so" (p. 164). Helmer here again scale-jumps, showing his power and authority of a 'centre'.

The Helmer-Krogstad relationship is also similar. "Morally ruined" (p. 155) Krogstad is also a character of lower footing. He has committed a sin of forgery, which according to Helmer is unforgivable. Helmer again appears to be the representative of the society where he determines the status of Krogstad. He delivers a long sermon on the effects of moral corruption:

[A] man with a thing of that sort on his conscience must be always lying and canting and shamming... the mask he must wear even toward those who stand nearest him--toward his own wife and children. The effect on the children--that's the most terrible part of it... Because in such an atmosphere of lies home life is poisoned and contaminated in every fiber. Every breath the children draw contains some germ of evil... Nearly all cases of early corruption may be traced to lying mothers... and here has this Krogstad been poisoning his own children for years past by a life of lies and hypocrisy-- that is why I call him morally ruined. (p. 155)

Social identity of the participants of a conversation can also be indexed by "affective and epistemological dispositions" of the speakers (Ochs, 1988, p. 296). Affective refers to the feelings, moods and attitudes of the participants while epistemological disposition refers to the beliefs, degree of knowledge and certainty of the knowledge of the speakers (p. 296). Helmer treats Nora as his possession and an object. There is recurrent use of the possessive pronoun "my" on his part as well as use of the word "little": "my lark", "my little featherbrain", "my little spendthrift" (p. 122), "my squirrel" (p. 123), "strange little being", "my own sweet little songbird" (p. 125), "my poor little Nora" (p. 126), "my little bird" (p. 153), "my willful little woman", "my precious little songbird" (p. 156), "my little Nora" (p. 164), "little helpless thing" (p. 181), "my little lark" (184), "my sweet little Capri girl, my capricious little Capri girl" (p. 191), "...my dearest treasure...all the loveliness that is mine, mine only, wholly and entirely mine " (p. 193), "my scared little songbird" (202), "my bewildered, helpless darling" (p. 203). All these remarks about Nora relate to his affective disposition. He appears before Nora as a person who is all for her, who treats her as an object that is very precious. Nora also responds similarly to him. "If your little squirrel were to beg

you... The squirrel would skip about and play all sorts of tricks if you would only be nice and kind... Your Lark would twitter from morning till night... I'll be an elf and dance in the moonlight for you, Torvald" (p. 163). The affective disposition of both indexes dualisms of adult/child, man/woman, husband/wife, human/nonhuman and master/slave. All these dualisms index his masculinity, power, authority and Nora's helplessness, weakness, smallness and human-less-ness.

Dr. Rank wants Helmer to be unaware of his approaching death because his "delicate nature shrinks so from all that is horrible" (p. 168). Death of Dr. Rank is his personal, individual matter. Helmer's exclusion from Rank's "sick-room" (p. 168) also indexes his 'macro' status. Even after getting knowledge of Rank's death, Helmer does not show any emotions and feelings toward it; on the contrary, he refers to Rank's approaching death thus: "And to go and creep into his lair like a wounded animal" (198). His status of a 'center' comes again to the forth, for whom death of an 'individual' is not very significant, even if he be his best friend.

Conversations between Nora and Helmer also index their epistemological dispositions, which in turn, index their social roles and status. Helmer has convinced Nora that on her own, she is helpless: "Nobody has such perfect taste as you; and I should so love to look well at the fancy ball. Torvald dear, couldn't you take me in hand, and settle what I'm to be, and arrange my costume for me... I can't get on without your help" (p. 154). Helmer also takes these remarks of Nora as "signals of distress" (p. 154). Like a typical set of dualisms, Nora being on the lower scale expresses her dependence on her husband. His likes and dislikes are also important for other characters. Mrs. Linden's act of knitting is reproached by him: "Do you know you ought to embroider instead... because it's so much prettier... you hold the embroidery in the left hand, so, and work the needle with the right hand, in a long graceful curve... But knitting is always ugly... there is something Chinese about it" (p. 192). After these comments, he changes the topic, leaving his words as final, indexing a scale-jump and a power move on his part.

Nora and Krogstad also have a working relationship. He is the man Nora borrowed money from to save her husband's life. Resemblance between the two has already been referred to; both of them are bearers of similar social and moral corruption; nonetheless, their relationship does highlight the dualisms of man/woman and masculine/feminine and by doing so, indexes power-inequality relationship between the two. In their first encounter in the play, Nora is

boastful of her husband's high rank in the bank and his authority over Krogstad. She, in a way, considers Krogstad as her subordinate too for she is soon to get rid of the installments of the loan and then Krogstad would be nothing but a man working under her husband. She also regards herself as superior to Krogstad because her act of borrowing money was for the love of her husband and her act of forgery was on account of saving her dying father from any trouble. Krogstad, she believes, could never do "a brave thing" like that (p. 151). Nora has always regarded the life saving act of hers as extremely 'manly': "I almost felt as if I was a man" (p. 137). So, in their conversation, each thinks that he/she is on a higher 'footing'; although, during their entire conversation, they seem to be shifting their 'footings'. First she tells him that she has "influence" enough to recommend Mrs. Linden for a post in the bank but she immediately steps back from her footing when he asks her to use her influence for him: "Mr.Krogstad, I have no influence--absolutely none" (146). Krogstad's affective disposition also indexes his shifts in footing. At first he politely asks her to prevent Helmer from dismissing him for the sake of his social status that he has been working hard to maintain, and gradually he goes so far so as to threaten her of law by blackmailing her. As long as Nora appeared influential and powerful, he was humble, almost begging but the moment Nora exclaimed her powerlessness, he started showing his ability to cause her damage by disclosing her secret. They take turns in out-scaling each other by holding on to different centres. Nora out-scales him by telling him that he is Helmer's subordinate and that Helmer can dismiss him any time he wishes. Krogstad on the other hand, out-scales her by telling her that law would not take in to account her personal motive of saving her husband's life. For Nora, Helmer remained the center, but Krogstad used society and, later, law as his cards.

Helmer's status of a 'center' and his attitude can be explained in terms of Bourdieu's (1990) concept of 'habitus'. 'Habitus' refers to the "behavioral predispositions" of people that they have attained through history (p. 54). So all of Helmer's principles, his predispositions, his morality and his respect of the social laws is his 'habitus' that he has achieved through the examples of the histories of people around him. The notion of 'habitus' was introduced by Bourdieu to dismantle the dualism of objectivism/subjectivism (King, 2000, p. 417). However, in the play there are instances when Helmer dwindles between his objective principles that he has learnt from the history and his subjective deeds that he has to succumb to in order to avoid unfavorable circumstances. In those instances, can we find clear distinction between objective and subjective scales. It is Helmer's act of stooping to the 'subjective' and 'personal' that makes him retreat from the status of a 'center'. This cannot be

explained in terms of Bourdieu's idea of the "sense of the game" because what Helmer plays is *foul* (as cited in King, 2000, p. 419)³.

Helmer remains a 'center' as long as he represents the society and religion; however he shifts his own 'center' when he stops conforming to religion and society and steps back from his footing. On Nora's consistent pleading for Krogstad, Helmer says: "I could perhaps have overlooked his moral failings at a pinch... But the fact is he was a college chum of mine-- there was one of those rash friendships between us that one so often repents of later. I may as well confess it at once-- he calls me by my Christian name; and he is tactless enough to do it when others are present... I assure you it's most painful to me. He would make my position at the bank perfectly unendurable" (p. 165). Here, Helmer steps back from a higher to a lower scale. He is ready to forgive one of one's moral failing but is not ready to forgive Krogstad for his personal reasons. So, from timeless, objective, decontextualized, Helmer recedes to temporal, personal and situated semiotic scale. Nora, who always looks toward Helmer as a perfect being and her 'center', immediately changes her 'center' and 'footing' too. She considers Helmer's motive of dismissing Krogstad as trivial: "That's such a petty reason." (165). In this conversation between the two, for the first time, the audience can see two individuals of the same footing speaking. There is no power-inequality relationship; however by calling Helmer's motive petty, Nora does out-scale him. Helmer loses all his power and authority over Nora. His statements lose the status of command for her: "Helmer: I shall not allow it! I forbid it! / Nora: It is of no use your forbidding me anything now" (p, 206). Gradually he is found to be suggesting and later begging.

From the above mentioned scene onwards, Helmer can never regain stability of a 'center'. It is hard for him to maintain his equilibrium for he consistently changes his 'center' for convenience. Immediately after his avowal of saving Nora from danger, risking his own "body and soul" for his "little song-bird", he retreats from his promise after having read the letter by Krogstad relating her act of forgery (198). From his 'little song-bird' and 'little squirrel', she turns to be a "wretched woman", "a hypocrite, a liar--worse, worse--a criminal" (199-200). Helmer ascribes this act of Nora as sacrilegious and immoral, out-scaling her by treating it as a sin; however, he instantly steps back from his footing by personalizing her act: "You have destroyed *my* whole happiness, you have ruined *my* future... *I am* in the power of

³ The concept of 'schema' seems more befitting here as it refers to not only what one does at a particular situation but also to what one is capable of (Hanks, 2000, p. 21).

a scoundrel" (p. 200). Later, after having received an apology from Krogstad he again says, "I am saved Nora, I am saved!" (201). With Helmer's change of 'footing', Nora also changes. She out-scales him by asking "And I?" (p. 210). Helmer's affective disposition--his multiple emotions of hatred, contempt, fear, remorse--all shows signs of selfishness and self-centeredness. By rejecting Helmer to be her husband, Nora rejects the centrality of the 'center'. She refuses him to be her guide and her educator (pp. 202, 206). She even questions the religion taught to her by the Pastor saying: "I will see whether what he taught me is right, or, at any rate, whether it is right for me" (p. 207). She also becomes suspicious of the laws and rules of the society: "I must make up my mind. Which is right--society or I" (p. 208). She even calls the law "very bad" for not understanding her motives (p. 151).

In the last scene, by constantly rejecting Helmer's ideas and proposals, Nora breaks away from dualised nature of their relationship. She dismantles man/woman, husband/wife, master/slave and human/woman dualisms to de-center Helmer: "I am a human being, just as much as you are" (p. 207). Nora's true nature is not a secret for the audience from the beginning. Her very act of eating macaroons and hiding it by telling lies is a proof enough of her willful nature. Later, her ability to save her husband's life by raising money through forgery also proves that she is not as dependent as she poses to be. In the end she confesses that she "pretended" to be whatever Helmer liked (p. 205). She was always a strong individual but only to be approved of by the society, she kept on trying to hide her true self. It is only through "inference" that we can come to know of her real self (Hanks, 2000, p. 29)⁴.

3. Conclusion

By creating such characters as Nora and Helmer, Ibsen has attempted to question the relationship of 'power and inequality' between individuals. He has made Nora representative of all the weak individuals of the society, the 'others'. Helmer, on the other hand, stands to represent the society as an institution and a 'master model' (Plumwood, 1993). By making Nora leave her home and children, Ibsen has not challenged the institution of marriage; on the contrary, what he has challenged is the unequal relationships between individuals. Had Ibsen been against marriage, he would not have shown the union of Mrs. Linden and Krogstad in the play. Ibsen has successfully shown the consequences of an imbalanced relationship. It is

⁴ Hanks in his *Intertexts: Writings on Language, Utterance, and Context* specifically talks about Maya language; however, his ideas can be generalized as speakers of every language are capable of being knowable only through inference.

not the husband/wife relationship that Ibsen has criticized; it is the master/slave, center/individual and human/woman dualisms arising out of this relationship that have been targeted by the author. Nora's act of leaving home is not the sign of her individuality and humanity; it in fact calls attention to the consequences that an imbalanced relationship may have. By showing Nora an independent woman at the end, Krogstad on his way to redeeming his social standing, Mrs.Linden to find somebody to work for and Dr.Rank eventually dying of his inherited disease, Ibsen has been successful in his attempt to show humanity at large.

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