Major Critical Theories

Monday, August 16, 2010A Doll's House - A Discourse on Feminism

When Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* was first published in 1879, it was a coming of age play that dealt with the lives and anxieties of the bourgeoisie women in Victorian Norway. Feminism is the dominant theme, as Ibsen investigated the tragedy of being born as a bourgeoisie female in a society ruled by a patriarchal law. If examined more closely, one can find traces of Marxist Ideology and other schools of thought. The first thing that I am going to start with is shedding light on the feminist attributes that this play is throbbing with and try to see it with the eyes of feminist writers like Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault and other feminist writers. The feminist school of thought has brought revolutionary ideas by exposing masculine stereotypes, revaluating women’s roles in society, studying women’s cultural and historical background, studying female literature, and criticizing social sexist values.

Norma Helmer is the best illustration of the illusioned woman who lives in a society where the male oppresses the female and reduces to a mere doll or plaything. Nora Helmer is that doll living in her fake doll house, which reinforces the fragile idea of a stable family living under a patriarchal and traditional roof. One can argue that Nora Helmer and the other female figures portrayed in A Doll’s House are the best models of the “second sex” or the “other” that the French revolutionary writer Simone de Beauvoir discussed in her essay, The Second Sex. De Beauvoir argues that throughout history, woman has been viewed as a “hindrance or a prison”. Aristotle also said,” The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities. We should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.” Woman is always depicted as secondary to man. She does not exist as an entity by herself but as the “Other”.

In her husband’s eyes, Nora is nothing but a silly “squirrel”, a “little skylark”, a “song bird” or a cute “scatterbrain” whose thoughts are nonsensical and typical to any other woman’s. Since her childhood, Nora has been regarded as the “other” by her father. Then, her father handed her to her husband who treated her like a valued possession. This is best depicted by Nora’s self-realization and awakening towards the end of the play: “When I lived at home with Daddy, he fed me all his opinions, until they became my opinions. Or if they didn’t, I kept quiet about it because I knew he wouldn’t have liked it. He used to call me his doll-child, and he played with me the way I used to play with my dolls. And when… Daddy handed me over to you. You arranged everything according to your taste, and I adapted my taste to yours… Now, looking back, I feel as if I’ve lived a beggar’s life—from hand to mouth.”

Ibsen’s depiction of the weak and docile woman brings to mind the 18th century revolutionary writer Mary Wollstonecraft who argues in her essay, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, that women are taught since their infancy to have the “softness of temper, outward obedience, scrupulous attention”. Once accompanied by the gift of beauty, these attributes will ensure them the protection of man. This is echoed very loudly in Torvald’s words, “Poor little frightened songbird…Rest assured; my wings are broad enough to shelter you. How lovely and secure our home, Nora. A sanctuary for you. I’ll keep you here like a hunted dove I’ve rescued unhurt from the hawk’s talons. …For a man there’s something intensely reassuring and pleasurable about knowing that he’s forgiven his wife—and that he’s forgiven her sincerely, with all his heart. It’s as if she becomes somehow doubly his possession, as if he’s allowed her to be reborn, so that in some way she becomes both his wife and his child.” Moreover, Mary Wollstonecraft stresses that man tries to secure the good conduct of a woman by reducing her to a state of innocence and childhood. She states, “Children, I grant, should be innocent; but when the epithet is applied to men, or women, it is but a civil term of weakness.” This is very evident in Torvald’s treating Nora as a child. He forbids her to eat macaroons; he makes her dance for him, dress up and recite for him. On the other hand, not only Nora is treated as a spoiled child but also as a sexual object that her husband fantasizes about. At parties, he keeps away and steals glances at her eventually pretending that they’re secretly engaged. When it’s time to go, he puts her shawl around her shoulders and pretends that she is his young bride. He fantasizes that they are just arriving from their wedding and are alone for the first time together. He is so possessive about her to the extent that he refuses to share Nora with female friends, like Mrs. Linde. Here, Nora becomes what Michel Foucault calls a docile body regulated by the norms of cultural life.

Thus towards the end of the play, Nora realizes that it is time that she regained her status as being the “One” after a long time of submission, which established her role as the “Other”. As Simone de Beauvoir has stressed, Nora has been taught not to take but to receive. She has gained only what her husband and father have been willing to grant her. In this sense, Nora’s domestic life in such a patriarchal society is just a reflection of the middle class women of her time that De Beauvoir depicted vividly in her essay. “They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men—fathers or husbands—more firmly than they are to other women. If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women.” Nora’s biggest fear is her husband hearing that she had forged her father’s signature to get the loan, which she needed to travel to Italy. Her motives were absolutely selfless because that trip saved her sick husband’s life. Nora knew that the revelation would have put her husband’s reputation at stake, but she felt deep inside that her husband would sacrifice his reputation to defend her as soon as he came to know that she did that to save his life. That feeling tormented her to the extent that she contemplated suicide. She is not worth her husband’s nobility! She is not even good enough to be a mother! Didn’t her husband tell her that “all young criminals have had dishonest mothers because it’s usually the mother’s responsibility”? Despite her great sacrifice driven by her love for her husband, Nora agrees that she is a bad influence on her children. She even decides to isolate herself from her kids and let the nursemaid take care of them fully. We can hear her saying to herself, “Corrupt my children. Poison my home. It’s not true. It could never be true.” This proves to us that Nora is very pleased with her role as the “Other”.

Yet, the doll house is shattered as well as Nora’s illusion. The doll finally recognizes that her role has been nothing but the “Other”. She is aware that it is she who agreed to the definition of the “One” and the” Other”. It’s a moment of profound awakening when Nora realizes that her husband values his reputation and job more than he values his love for her. Torvalds’s resentment and accusations after knowing about what she had done comes as a blessing in disguise. We hear Torvald telling her, “For all these years, for eight years now, you’ve been my pride and joy, and now I find you’re a hypocrite and a liar, and worse, worse than that…a criminal! The whole thing is an abyss of ugliness! You ought to be ashamed.” Simone de Beauvoir says that if the woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about the change. But here we tell De Beauvoir that Nora is willing to bring about the change. The harsh reality smacks her in the face; a wave of disillusionment wakes her up. She decides bravely to abandon her family to escape the restrictive confines of the patriarchal society she lives in. She is resolved to go out into the world and gain real experience. She is determined to think out everything for herself and be able to make her own decisions.

After all that has been said, we conclude that the woman figure/body in *A Doll’s House* is reduced, as Susan Bordo believes, to a “text of culture” on which all cultural aspects of gender difference are reinforced. That is, the female ideology is supported and reinforced by the social structure in which women have little social, political, or economic power. The women figures in *A Doll’s House* are depicted as socially and psychologically dependent on men in the institution of marriage and motherhood. In addition to Nora, we have the character of Mrs. Linde who was forced to break up with her fiancé and marry another man who could support her, her mother, and two brothers. We also come across the character of the nurse who had to give up her child conceived outside the wedlock in order to keep her job.

From a different standpoint, one can argue that *A Doll’s House* carries some aspects of the Marxist Ideology regarding the conflicts taking place at that time, not only regarding the male and female relationship, but also financial relations. The Helmer household belongs to the bourgeoisie class that wasn’t born as aristocrats, but ascended to social and financial wellbeing through employment and education. Hence, *A Doll’s House* portrays the stubborn class pride of saving face and preserving one’s reputation. In the play, Torvald Helmer, who is a bank manager, confesses that one of the reasons that made him fire Krogstad, one of his employees, was that he was a former schoolmate and still insists on calling him by his first name in front of the other employees at the bank. This embarrasses Torvald and makes him uncomfortable. We also have the character of Mrs. Linde who had to marry someone she didn’t love in order to escape poverty, and later, after his death, had to work non-stop workdays. She feels all alone and hollow, working for herself. Mrs. Linde is the best example of the working class person who tastes the bitterness of a materialistic life being reduced to the value of a mere commodity and a producer of labor power.

Furthermore, it can be debated that the male-female relationship in *A Doll’s House* is based on a Master-Slave ideology which Friedrich Hegel, the great Enlightenment theorist, started. The relationship between Torvald and Helmer evolves according to a Master-Slave relationship. Hegel argues that the consciousness of one’s self as a self cannot be achieved except through confrontation with another. Both Nora and her husband Torvald recognized their dependency on each other and that self-consciousness led to Nora’s awakening in the end. Thus, Nora’s character self was made through the dialectical special interrelationship between her and her husband on one side and between her and the patriarchal society on the other. Hegel says that the self “through supersession, receives back its own self, because, by superseding its otherness, it again becomes equal to itself; but secondly, it equally gives the other self-consciousness back again to itself, for it saw itself in the other, but superseded this being of itself in the other and thus lets the other again go free.” First Nora acknowledges Torvald as her master and she dutifully assumes her role as the slave who is dependent on her master. After the confrontation, Nora realizes the master’s dependency on her which leads her to supersede him and be free of him.

I also noticed that we can trace the roots of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* in Plato’s *Allegory of Cave*. Nora’s life with her husband is an illusion, and their marriage is a masquerade. As she confronts Torvald, she says, “Our house has never been anything but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as I was daddy’s doll-child when I was at home. My children as well, they’ve been my dolls. I used to enjoy it when you played games with me, just as they enjoyed it when I played games with them. That’s all our marriage has been, Torvald.” Thus, her life in the doll house was like the life of the people chained in the cave. What she saw was not the true reality, but the shadow of reality. She was content with her role as the subservient female whose fate was determined by that of her husband. She also never questioned her inferior predetermined position in the relationship. This is evidenced in her complete confidence in hiding the truth about borrowing money in order to save Torvald’s health. About that she told Mrs. Linde, “it would be a terrible blow to Torvald’s masculine self-esteem; he’d find it so painful and humiliating to think that he owed me something. It would completely unbalance our relationship. It would be the end of our beautiful, happy home.” Thus, Nora emerges from that cave that showed her the distorted reality. Upon realizing her value in her husband’s life, the true reality dazzles her like the bright sun. She realizes that she has been living with a stranger for eight years; she becomes aware of the crippling society that she is living in. Therefore, she decides to leave the dark cave and embrace the luminous freedom that she grants herself.

*A Doll’s House* is a revolutionary play that exposes the defects of the Victorian patriarchal society. It is the triumph of the woman over all hindrances whether social, masculine, or economic. Once I finished reading the play, I was left in a reflective state. I thought about the universality of the woman figure portrayed in Ibsen’s play. Now, about 130 years after the publication of *A Doll’s House*, many women still face the same circumstances that Nora faced. For instance, today’s women working in the same capacity as men make about 72 cents compared to a dollar for men. Additionally, many women face discrimination in the workplace and in life in general. Many professions remain dominated by men in a day when women are more than capable of physically handling the job. Despite all their social, political, and career advancement, some women still feel emotionally crippled as their destinies are tied to that of the patriarchal society. The rise in the number of women suffering from anorexia and bulimia nowadays is an evidence of the emotional oppression that women are subjected to. Susan Bordo believes that social norms of beauty, motherhood, absence or presence of sexual modesty position the woman in a struggle with the prevailing social images and conventions.

“I believe that before anything else, I’m a human being, just as much of as you are…or at least I’m going to try to turn myself into one,” Nora tells Torvald in a moment of self-realization. This has been the woman’s quest throughout history. Nora Helmer in *A Doll’s House* triumphs over all obstacles and finally recognizes her duty towards herself which had always been neglected. Yet, many more women still continue to shatter the collars of gender anxiety and enslavement placed by the masculine world around their necks.

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