

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE PORTRAYAL OF NEW WOMAN
IN HENRIK IBSEN'S *THE DOLL'S HOUSE* AND
VIJAY TENDULKAR'S *KAMALA***

DR. HARISH G. TAPADIA

VASANTRAO NAIK GOVT. INSTITUTE
OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, NAGPUR, M.S.,
INDIA.

Abstract:

*The New Woman, a feminist ideal that emerged in the late nineteenth century with plays such as Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* and G.B. Shaw's *Candida*, has exercised a profound influence on the world of literature. Society has realised that nurturing the new woman is essential for improving our civilisation. The deplorable condition of women is being increasingly discussed in literary works with a view to get rid of the discrimination against them. Both Henrik Ibsen and Vijay Tendulkar have used their plays as a means of bringing the issue of women's emancipation to the forefront. Like Ibsen's play *The Doll's House*, Tendulkar's *Kamala* also advocates equality for women. Both these plays comment on women's status through an exploration of their marital relationships. The present paper attempts to make a comparative study of the portrayal of new Woman in Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* and Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala*.*

Keywords:- *Vijay Tendulkar, Henrik Ibsen, Krogstad*

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The New Woman, a feminist ideal that emerged in the late nineteenth century with plays such as Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* and G.B. Shaw's *Candida*, has exercised a profound influence on the world of literature. Society has realised that nurturing the new woman is essential for improving our civilisation. The deplorable condition of women is being increasingly discussed in literary works with a view to get rid of the discrimination against them. Both Henrik Ibsen and Vijay Tendulkar have used their plays as a means of bringing the issue of women's emancipation to the forefront. Like Ibsen's play *The Doll's House*, Tendulkar's *Kamala* also advocates equality for women. Both these plays comment on women's status through an exploration of their marital relationships. The present paper attempts to make a comparative study of the portrayal of new Woman in Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* and Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala*.

Ibsen is universally regarded as the greatest Norwegian playwright. A master of realism, he exposed hidden realities which were hard to digest for his contemporaries. *A Doll's House* (1879) was originally written in Danish language. Its English translation was published by Oxford University Press in 1928. It is one of the most performed plays in world. Nora, the protagonist, has been married to Torvald Helmer since nine years. They have three children. Torvald, a lawyer, is soon going to become the manager of a bank. Torvald tries to keep a tight control over Nora's spending habits. While chastising her for unnecessary expenses, he says:

'You always find some new way of wheedling money out of me, and, as soon as you have got it, it seems to melt in your hands. You never know where it has gone.' (Ibsen 5)

Torvald has the habit of addressing Nora with terms of endearment such as my sweet little skylark, my little squirrel etc. According to Michael Meyer, by addressing Nora with such sickeningly syrupy pet names, Torvald degrades her into feeling as though she has no important purpose in life but to please him. (Meyer 1628)

Eight years ago, Torvald had fallen gravely ill. The doctors had asked Nora to take him to a warmer place somewhere in South to save his life. Nora decided to conceal this matter from Torvald and manage this trip on her own. She took a loan from Mr. Krogstad for these expenses. She had to forge her father's signature on the bond of surety as he was also very ill at that time. Krogstad had found this out afterwards. She had been repaying the loan in instalments since then by cutting down on her own expenses. We know about all these things from Nora's conversation with Mrs. Linde, her childhood friend. While explaining to Mrs. Linde her reason of keeping this thing secret from Torvald, Nora says:

'how painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly independence, to know that he owed me anything! It would upset our mutual relations altogether; our beautiful happy home would no longer be what it is now.' (Ibsen 14)

Susanna Rustin aptly comments that Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* shines a very harsh light on the messy heart of relationships and how difficult it can be to be honest with another human being even if you love them. (Rustin)

Krogstad is found guilty of forgery and is likely to be terminated from the bank where he works. Torvald is going to become the manager of the same bank. Krogstad requests Torvald to bail him out but he refuses. So Krogstad asks Nora to convince her husband to help him. Nora expresses her inability to do so. Krogstad threatens that he will expose her forgery if she does not save him. Nora's peace of mind is completely ruined due to this storm in her life. Nora asks Torvald about Krogstad's future. He refuses to save Torvald and asks her not to interfere. He professes to be a man of morals. Nora expresses her apprehension that Krogstad may do something to affect his reputation in revenge. Torvald says that he is ready to face the consequences of his action. Nora feels that Torvald would take the blame on himself when he will know the reason of Nora's forgery. There is a severe conflict in her mind. When Anne, the nurse, tells Nora that her children are eagerly seeking her company, she replies: 'No, no, no! Don't let them come to me! You stay with them, Anne. ... Deprive my little children? Poison my home?' (Ibsen 32) Nora feels that she is not a good influence for her children and begins to avoid them.

Dr. Rank is Nora's neighbour. He is suffering from a terminal disease. Mrs. Linde thinks that Nora had taken the loan from him. Nora clears her misunderstanding and tells her about the problem Krogstad has created in her life. She offers to talk to Krogstad to prevent him from exposing Nora's forgery. He has already sent a letter to Torvald revealing everything. When Mrs. Linde offers to marry him, he gives up the plan of exposing Nora. Mrs. Linde has second thoughts. She wants Torvald to know the truth so that his marriage will be free from falsehood and secrets. Krogstad writes a second letter to Torvald saying

that he is going to make a new honest beginning with Mrs. Linde and won't trouble the Helmers anymore.

Nora gets a rude shock when Torvald reads Krogstad's first letter. The hollowness of his morals and his extreme self-centredness comes out through his reaction. He blames Nora for her act of forgery and does not take into account her reasons for doing it. He shows readiness to bow down to Krogstad's demands in order to protect his reputation. He declares that his relationship with Nora will not be the same again. Then he reads Krogstad's second letter and declares that everything is all-right. Now he offers to forgive Nora. Thus he reveals himself to be a self-conceited moralist. Nora clearly realises the hollowness of his love for her and declares that she is leaving him to live life on her own terms. Such an action on the part of a married woman and that too, a mother of three children, was unthinkable in those days. While pointing out the far-reaching influence of Nora's action on social life, G.B. Shaw writes: 'Nora's revolt is the end of a chapter of human history. The slam of the door behind her is more momentous than the cannon of Waterloo or Sedan.' (Shaw 259)

Vijay Tendulkar's plays written in the second half of twentieth century also show the concept of New Woman as he has acknowledged the influence of western playwrights such as Ibsen and Shaw on him. His play '*Kamala*' (translated into English by Priya Adarkar) reveals his keen insight into the pitiable status of women in the male dominated urban middle class society. The author was inspired in writing this play by a real life incident reported in 'The Indian Express' by a journalist who actually bought a woman from rural flesh market. Through the character of Sarita, Jaisingh's wife, in his play *Kamala*, Tendulkar has given an interesting picture of a modern Indian woman who is caught between the opposite pulls of tradition and modernity. Though Sarita is an educated urban lady, she is treated with scant respect by her husband, Jaisingh. Moreover, Sarita is not even aware of the slave-like existence to which Jaisingh has reduced her. While Jaisingh remains absent from home for long periods, she looks after everything dutifully. She does everything that is possible to please Jaisingh.

Jaisingh has bought Kamala, a tribal woman, for two hundred and fifty rupees to prove that human trafficking exists. On the surface Jaisingh is fighting for the cause of the poor and the down trodden. In reality, he just wants to use this incident to get publicity and promotion. When she sees Jaisingh using Kamala, whom he has bought to prove the prevalence of flesh-trade, as a commodity, her eyes are opened. She understands Jaisingh's real attitude of looking at her as only an object of enjoyment and as a caretaker of the house. Shailaja Wadikar observes that Sarita realises that she is bound to her husband in the wedlock to slave for him permanently after the entry of Kamala in her house. (Wadikar

77) Sarita decides to change her condition and starts asserting her individuality. She objects to Jaisingh's decision to send Kamala to an orphanage. She refuses to accompany him to a party. She is so angry and frustrated because of her husband's behaviour that she thinks of arranging a press conference to expose Jaisingh in front of the world. She even refuses to submit to Jaisingh's desire for physical intimacy.

Sarita's rebellion, however, is short-lived. She comes to know that Jaisingh has been sacked by his employer. Seeing that Jaisingh is feeling disgruntled at the way he has been treated by his employer, Sarita postpones her rebellion. Thus Tendulkar has portrayed Sarita as a modern woman who can probe her inner mind, desires and ambitions. She is mentally prepared for the struggle with society to assert her self identity. But she is also, in the words of Shanta Gokhale, a compassionate human being who defers her rebellion against her husband as he is in an acute need of her moral support. (Gokhale 42) Sarita is a changed personality at the end of the play. She has become conscious of her identity and is determined to change her life in future.

Kamala innocently asks her how much Jaisingh has paid to buy Sarita. This question makes Sarita realise that her own condition is no better than Kamala's. Jain, Jaisingh's fellow journalist, is also aware of Sarita's exploitation at the hands of her husband. He says to Sarita:

'This warrior against exploitation in the country is exploiting you. He's made a drudge out of a horse-riding independent girl from a princely house. ... Shame on you! Hero of anti-exploitation campaigns makes slave of wife!' (Tendulkar 17)

Arundhati Banerjee aptly comments:

'Like Kamala, Sarita is also an object in Jadhav's life, an object that provides physical enjoyment, social companionship and domestic comfort. Kamala's entry into the household reveals to Sarita the selfish hypocrisy of her husband and the insignificance of her own existence.' (Banerjee 581)

While talking to Kakasaheb, she refers to Jaisingh sarcastically as the 'gentleman' and suggests that she will bare the fact of her slavery in front of the world in a press conference. She will make it public that though she is a wife, she is treated no better than a domestic slave. Shibu Simon writes: 'Sarita, like 'Nora' in Ibsen's 'A Doll's House', has thus undergone a sea-change and is now entirely an independent and assertive woman who has finally discovered her real identity.' (Simon 190) On being questioned by Kakasaheb regarding her submissive attitude in the last ten years of her married life, Sarita replies:

'Kamala showed me everything. Because of her, I suddenly saw things clearly. I saw that the man I thought my partner was the master of a slave. I have no rights at all in this house. Because I'm a slave. (Tendulkar 46)

Sarita gives up her rebellion at the end of the play. However, she does not lose her self-belief and conviction. She tells Kakasaheb: 'a day will come, Kakasaheb, when I will stop being a slave. I'll no longer be an object to be used and thrown away. I'll do what I wish, and no one will rule over me.' (Tendulkar 52) The quiet determination in these words suggests that she has not given up her struggle for identity. As Sarita herself is a sufferer, she understands the agony that Jaisingh is going through when he is dismissed from his job.

A comparative study of Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* and Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* shows that Nora and Sarita, women belonging to nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively, have both been portrayed as victims of male domination and wake up to a sense of duty towards themselves. Whereas Nora frees herself from her husband's control at the risk of breaking her marriage, Sarita chooses to save her marriage. Sarita has realised the bitter reality of her actual condition in her husband's house. It is not her submissiveness but sympathy for Jaisingh who is on the verge of mental breakdown. Like Nora, she has also converted into a thinking mature woman. Ibsen's *The Doll's House* and Tendulkar's *Kamala* deal with women's place in home and show that not much has changed with the passage of time. Both Ibsen and Tendulkar were not self-declared advocates of feminism and looked at the problems of their heroines from the point of view of their belief in human freedom. Both have shown an unorthodox frame of mind and a genuine interest in women's freedom while dealing with the plight of women in different societies and in different contexts. Both these playwrights raise questions without answering them and only try to make us aware of the problem.

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