*Journal of Language Studies* Vol. 10, No. 2, Part 2, 2026, Pages (327-343)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.25130/Lang.10.2.P2.17

IRAQI Academic Scientific Journals
العراقية المجلات الأكاديمية العلمية
ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)
Journal of Language Studies
Contents available at: https://jls.tu.edu.iq/index.php/JLS

# The Doll's House as a Sickroom: Patriarchy, Moral Corruption, and Female Identity

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**Received:** 28/11/2025, **Accepted:** 30/12/2025, **Online Published:** 30/06/2026

## Abstract

At the end of the nineteenth century, Henrik Ibsen, the major Norwegian playwright and 'the father of prose drama', challenged the conventions of bourgeois society by exposing the hidden illnesses of its institutions. His play *A Doll's House* exposes the hidden moral "illnesses" of nineteenth-century patriarchal society by intertwining hereditary disease with social corruption. This study argues that the play uses the metaphor of hereditary illness not to condemn women but to reveal how patriarchy pathologises them. While Dr Rank's inherited tuberculosis provokes sympathy and Krogstad's moral weakness is framed as socially conditioned, Nora is judged far more harshly: her supposed "inheritance" of her father's flaws is treated as proof of inherent female corruption. Drawing on feminist theory, this study argues that such framing reflects a gendered double standard in which men's faults are medicalised,

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whereas women's independence is cast as moral danger. Nora's final rejection of the "doll" identity eventually unmasks patriarchy, not women, as the true hereditary disease. Through this metaphor, Ibsen presents the social construction of femininity and the oppressive structures that define women as inherently flawed.

***Keywords:*** female identity, feminist literary criticism, heredity; moral corruption, patriarchal discourse

# بيت الدمية كغرفة مرضى: الأبوية، الفساد الأخلاقي، والهوية الأنثوية

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**المستخلص**

في أواخر القرن التاسع عشر، تحدى هنريك إبسن، المسرحي النرويجي البارز و"أبو الدراما النثرية"، تقاليد المجتمع البرجوازي من خلال كشفه للأمراض الكامنة في مؤسساته. ويظهر مسرحه بيت الدمية "الأمراض" الأخلاقية للمجتمع الأبوي في القرن التاسع عشر عبر تشابك مرض الوراثة مع الفساد الاجتماعي. تجادل هذه الدراسة بأن إبسن يوظف مجاز المرض الوراثي لا لإدانة المرأة، بل لكشف كيفية قيام النظام الأبوي بمرضنتها وتصويرها ككائن فاسد بطبيعته. ففي حين يثير داء السل الوراثي لدى الدكتور رانك التعاطف، وتقدم ضعف كروجستاد الأخلاقي بوصفها نتاجاً اجتماعياً، تدان نورا بشكل أشد قسوة: إذ تُفسر "وراثتها" لعيوب والدها كدليل على فساد أنثوي متأصل. وبالاستناد إلى النظرية النسوية، ترى هذه الدراسة أن هذا التصوير يعكس معياراً مزدوجاً يطبب أخطاء الرجال، لكنه يصور استقلالية المرأة بوصفها خطراً أخلاقياً. وتمثل رفض نورا النهائي لهوية "الدمية" تعريةً للنظام الأبوي، لا للمرأة، بوصفه المرض الوراثي الحقيقي. ومن خلال هذا المجاز، يكشف إبسن البناء الاجتماعي للأنوثة والبنى القمعية التي تظهر النساء ككائنات فاسدة على نحو جوهري.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الهوية الأنثوية، النقد الأدبي النسوي، الوراثة، الفساد الأخلاقي، المنظور الأبوي

## Introduction

Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) is a prominent figure in the history of modern drama, often credited with transforming the European stage by introducing realism and confronting social problems directly. He gained his reputation as an outstanding playwright in the English repertoire because of his aesthetic and social theatrical achievements. He represented 'the real' on the stage (Luckhurst, 2006, p. 36).

The greatness of Ibsen as a playwright lies in his ability to relate drama to actual life by his bold presentation of contemporary social problems on the stage in a realistic manner. Unlike the romantic and melodramatic conventions of earlier nineteenth-century theatre, Ibsen's plays address the struggles of middle-class life and expose the hidden tensions beneath bourgeois respectability. When Ibsen started his career as a playwright, European drama followed either the old romantic tradition or the new movement, which was known as the well-made play. Romantic drama portrayed unreal situations using highly theatrical acting styles. Whereas the well-made play seemed to be more realistic, dealing with characters from everyday life but it lacked the psychological dimension of the characters. Ibsen revolted against both the romantic drama and the well-made plays, adopting in his writing of realistic plays (Innes, 2000, p. 76). Therefore, Ibsen's achievements in the theatre cannot be ignored. He depicted real people in real situations by arguing the political and social issues of his day. He shows that tragedy could be written about ordinary people and in ordinary, everyday prose. Thus, Ibsen presents the problems of society through real and ordinary characters. Therefore, he is considered a true representative of the realist prose drama. He can also be regarded as a humanist because he shows his in-depth understanding of human character and human relationships. His social plays reflect his great understanding of the human mind. In his letter to L. Passarge, he declares that his plays convey the problems of society in a real way with real characters, he says:

> Everything that I have written has the closest possible connection with what I have lived through—even if I have not actually experienced it. In every new work I have aimed at my own spiritual emancipation and

> purification—for no man can escape the responsibilities and the guilt of the society to which he belongs (Haugen, 1979, p. 19).

Critics frequently identify Ibsen as the pioneer of the "problem play," using drama to explore urgent social and moral conflicts within the family and society. "In a problem play, the dramatist does not offer a ready-made solution to the problem with which it deals. Ibsen presents the problem and leaves the solution to the readers" (Lall, 2006, p. 186).

Ibsen's realism not only challenged theatrical conventions but also reflected the intellectual climate of his age. The nineteenth century saw rapid developments in medicine, psychology, and theories of heredity, and these ideas surfaced in his drama. His familiarity with medical discourse allowed him to use the language of disease and inheritance not simply as scientific motifs but as powerful symbols of moral and social corruption. In plays such as *Ghosts* and *A Doll's House*, hereditary illness functions as more than biological inheritance: it becomes a metaphor for the corruption and hypocrisy of modern society. To understand how Ibsen uses the hereditary disease as a factor that expands the social reality of the play, the meaning of the Hereditary Disease should be considered. "Hereditary Disease is a disease or disorder that is inherited genetically. Generally, Hereditary Diseases are passed on from one generation to another through defective genes. These diseases are transmitted in the same family" (Atzmon, 2020).

Thus, Ibsen's work reflects not only the literary shift toward realism but also contemporary concerns with heredity, medicine, and psychology. In *A Doll's House* (1879), Ibsen employs the metaphor of hereditary disease not only to reflect scientific concerns but also to critique patriarchy. The problem of this play is: "What is the position of a woman in relation to her husband and her home?" (Lall, 2006, p. 186). The Play shows the sad consequences of the subordination of a married woman to the control of her husband in a patriarchal society. In this play, Ibsen portrays a conventional contemporary middle-class couple, Nora and Torvald Helmer, showing his greatness as a playwright of social realities. The social reality that concerns Ibsen is the role of a married woman in her household at the time of the play (Lall, 2006, p. 187). In this respect, the play deals with the social problems of individuals and the relationships

among humans. Self-identity is one of the main concerns of the play. This paper argues that while male flaws are medicalised and treated with sympathy, female flaws are condemned as moral corruption (Dr Rank's inherited tuberculosis is met with sympathy, Nora's supposed "inheritance" of her father's dishonesty is judged as moral degeneracy). This gendered double standard demonstrates how patriarchy weaponises the discourse of heredity to maintain control over female identity. By applying feminist literary criticism, with insights from medical humanities, this study contends that patriarchy itself is the true hereditary disease infecting the modern family.

This study embraces a feminist literary approach, informed by insights from medical humanities and gender theory. The analysis deals with close textual reading of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, focusing on the metaphors of heredity and disease as expressions of patriarchal discourse. The study examines constructions of female identity, moral judgment, and social control from the perspectives of feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Toril Moi, Judith Butler, and Joan Templeton that provide the theoretical framework of the study. Through this approach, the study argues how the language of illness functions ideologically to legitimise patriarchal authority and to frame women's independence as moral deviation within bourgeois society.

**Hereditary Disease as Patriarchal Discourse**

Henrik Ibsen, as a prominent dramatist, portrays the influence of hereditary physical disease as well as moral corruption on his characters. He uses physical disease as a representative of moral corruption. He believes that the theme of disease not only affects the physical level, but also includes all the dead ideas, rotten values, and moral corruption in society that influence the characters. Physical disease exacerbates the effects of moral corruption, demonstrating that society exerts a restrictive influence on its members leading to hypocrisy, corruption and a loss of identity. In his plays, Ibsen tries to find a way "to expel disease from the community" (Johnsen, 2003, p. 56). The idea of "disease" can also be read as a metaphor for patriarchy itself, which infects women's identities by framing them as inherently weak, dishonest, or corrupt. Feminist critics such as Toril Moi argue that Ibsen's plays expose not female nature but "the situation of women in the family and society" (Moi, 2006, p. 225) under patriarchal values.

Ibsen adopts different parallels to compare and contrast the physical illness of one character with the moral corruption of the other, and how their parents and society at large are responsible for their actions. Dr Rank is a close family friend of the Helmers, whose disease supports the issue of hereditary disease in the play. He is a cynical pessimist who suffers from tuberculosis that he has inherited from his father. Dr Rank blames his father for his plight: "...my poor innocent spine has to suffer for my father's youthful amusements" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 49). Dr Rank's physical illness stands in strong contrast to the moral corruption of Krogstad, the blackmailer. Krogstad is the man responsible for creating a complication in Nora's life and for bringing about a crisis in her relations with her husband. He is the man from whom Nora borrowed money to be able to take her sick husband to a warm country. Although Nora used to give him regular repayments of the loan, he discovered that he could exercise a strong influence upon her since he found that Nora forged her father's signature. When Krogstad finds himself in trouble at the bank and he will lose his job, he asks Nora to speak to her husband on his behalf to retain his job at the bank. Dr Rank, as well as Helmer, used to regard Krogstad as a morally corrupted one. Nora offers a common parallel to both the cases of physical decadence as well as of moral illness. What is striking here is that while Rank and Krogstad are judged as products of their fathers and their society, Nora is condemned much more harshly. She is told that her "inheritance" from her father makes her corrupt, which reflects a gendered double standard: men's flaws are medicalised or excused, while women's are moralised and punished. Kate Millett argues that patriarchy functions through the family as its chief institution, constructing women as carriers of corruption within the unit it controls (2000, p. 33).

The theme of hereditary disease is shown in Dr Rank's speech about Krogstad to Nora. Dr Rank compares his physical disease with the moral corruption of Krogstad. This comparison shows the relation between the hereditary disease and the moral corruption in respect of the social aspect. Dr Rank says: "However wretched I may feel, I want to prolong the agony as long as possible. All my patients are like that. And so are those who are morally diseased, one of them, ... Krogstad… He suffers from a diseased moral character, Mrs. Helmer, but even he began talking of its being highly important that lie should live" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 22). In this speech, Dr Rank associates physical illness with

moral illness by comparing his wretched condition with that of Krogstad. According to Dr Rank, Krogstad suffers from a diseased moral character as he is prone to engaging in crime. The suffering of the two characters shows the relation between physical illness and moral illness. Nora's presence in this conversation is significant. By overhearing Rank equate disease with corruption, Nora begins to fear that she herself might be diseased—socially and morally—because of her father's reputation. Feminist readings suggest that this is how patriarchy works: it teaches women to internalise guilt for the corruption of men, keeping them subordinate.

In spite of his miserable condition, Dr Rank has the desire to live his life as much as possible. Morally diseased persons, says Dr Rank, want to continue living in this world. He refers to Krogstad, saying that he is "rotten to the core" and yet wants to live. Marianne Sturman depicts this condition as: "with this in mind, Ibsen indicates that Krogstad clings to his respectability, or moral health, just as Dr Rank clings to whatever physical life he has left" (1965, p. 15). Emma Goldman considers Krogstad as "a man with a shady past in the eyes of the community and of the righteous moralist, Torvald Helmer" (1914, p. 2). Here again, the men's struggles—Rank's illness, Krogstad's moral weakness—are presented with a degree of sympathy or possibility of redemption. By contrast, Nora is denied such leniency. Feminist critics like Joan Templeton argue that much of the criticism of *A Doll's House* sought to deny its feminist implications, and she highlights the gendered nature of the play's judgment of Nora versus male characters (1989, p. 28).

Dr Rank also insists that society excessively prefers the persons who are morally corrupt. He believes that honest people are ignored in this world, yet the morally corrupt people have good jobs. Mrs Linde, an old friend of Nora's, believes that the morally sick need to be protected. Dr Rank comments on this idea, saying: 'That is the sentiment that is turning society into a sick house' (Ibsen, 2005, p. 23). Dr Rank's reference to society as a sick house represents the corrupting values of society. He suggests that the individual in society is damaged by his/ her own actions, to whom society should behave with limited sympathy. He argues with Mrs Linde about society's responsibility to care for those sick people in this way. Rank's metaphor of society as a "sick house" ironically

prepares for the way Nora's home itself functions as a sickroom, where patriarchal values infect female identity. The "sickness" is not merely in individuals like Krogstad but in the entire structure of patriarchy that defines women as diseased.

**The Sickroom of Patriarchy: Women as Carriers of Corruption**

Dr Rank refers to Krogstad as a morally irredeemable person who appears as a source of threat to Nora's happiness. Both Nora and Krogstad are guilty of forgery, a criminal act. It is Krogstad who makes Nora conscious of the seriousness of forging her father's signature on the bond. At the time of forging her father's signature, she had not thought that she was doing anything which could lead her to trouble. Even when Krogstad first tells her about her act of forgery as having been a serious violation of the law, she can hardly believe him because she is unaware of the consequences and cannot see how the law can condemn a woman who tries to spare her sick father's feelings and who tries to save her husband's life. She does her best to protect her threatened household, prioritizing her family over legal consequences J.J. Gaikwad refers to the moral ground on which Nora wonders about social morals. He states:

> On the moral ground, Nora makes question to societal morals when she is informed that forging her father's signature to save her husband's life is a criminal act. She believes that the most heroic action of her life is taking loan on her own to save the life of her husband. She argues that how her sacrifices to save her husband's life could be an unforgivable crime in the eyes of society (2016, p. 116).

Nora's inability to understand why her sacrifice is condemned reflects a clash between patriarchal law and female agency. From a feminist perspective, her forgery is not corruption but resistance: she asserts her right to act independently, yet patriarchal authority recasts this autonomy as criminality.

Nora starts to realise that she has done something wrong when her husband, Helmer, condemns Krogstad for having committed a breach of the law similar to the one committed by her. Nora suffers from mental pain when Helmer unconsciously mentions that Krogstad's real crime was not forgery but disguising it, so he is: "poisoning his own

children with lies and dissimulation" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 36). He believes that Krogstad's criminal act has made him dishonest, consequently polluting his own children with his moral illness. Helmer explains the influence of deception, saying: "an atmosphere of lies infects and poisons the whole life of a home. Each breath the children take in such a house is full of the germs of evil" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 36). Helmer uses the corrupt conduct as a moral sickness. For him, its source is the home, and the sickness perpetually spreads. He insists that the mothers should be blamed for evil-doings. He informs Nora that women have a responsibility for their children's morality. He continues lecturing Nora about mothers who behave in an immoral way, who infect their children with "the germs of evil" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 36), reinforcing the work of heredity. Thus, Nora feels the same fear of corrupting her own children with a moral corruption as foul as Dr Rank's physical illness, or Krogstad's deception. She starts to avoid her children, as her influence upon them should not corrupt them. Helmer's lecture embodies patriarchal discourse at its core: women are blamed for transmitting 'moral infection,' while men's faults are excused. Simone de Beauvoir's, a French existentialist writer and feminist theorist, idea of woman as 'Other' is clear here: "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. … She is defined and differentiated with reference to him; she is the Other" (1956, pp. 15-16). As feminist critics show in other contexts, patriarchal societies often reduce women to objects whose value is defined by male expectations. Berzenji observes in Atwood's *The Edible Woman* that women are frequently objectified and victimised in a male-dominated society, and treated as items to be consumed rather than individuals with agency (2008, p. 1).

Consequently, Nora is captivated by the idea of corrupting her children as her face turns pale with fear and she miserably realises that the poison of moral corruption is in her manners, yet she tries to deny that idea saying: "Deprave my little children? Poison my home? ... It's not true. It can't possibly be true" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 37). This moment shows how patriarchy forces women into internalized guilt. Nora accepts Helmer's discourse that her independence is dangerous, illustrating what Kate Millett calls patriarchy's political strategy: maintaining female subordination by making women believe they themselves are the source of corruption (2000, pp. 25-26).

Helmer hates Krogstad because of his immoral conduct in the bank, and he announces that "... I literally feel physically ill when I am in the company of such people" (2. 35). Nora feels herself equally corrupt and sick. Nora is afraid of the destruction of her house as a consequence of her illegal action. At the same time, she is frightened of the idea that her children will be morally corrupt if she continues to be their mother. Ibsen contrasts Helmer's disgust with Nora's fear: the man externalises corruption onto others, while the woman internalises it into her very identity. This difference highlights the gendered imbalance of moral responsibility in patriarchal culture.

Nora tries to convince her husband to let Krogstad keep his job in the bank with the intention that her deal with him would not be revealed, but Helmer reproaches her tears as baseless that her "father's reputation as a public official was not above suspicion. Mine is!" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 45) This increases Nora's sense of her defects because she has inherited some of her faults and weaknesses from her father, such as spending money wastefully, telling lies, using intrigues to steal Krogstad's letter, and above all, forging her father's signature and concealing from her husband the deal into which she had entered with Krogstad. Helmer's accusation reduces Nora's individuality to her father's legacy, showing how patriarchy weaponises the idea of 'inheritance' to deny women independent identity. Toril Moi argues that Ibsen exposes this mechanism: "Nora's struggle for recognition as a human being … only after explicitly rejecting … "doll" and "wife and mother"" (2006, p. 226).

Nora's father was an irresponsible and, to some extent, an unscrupulous man who had behaved with dishonesty. Helmer knows well the deception of Nora's father, so he hints at the subject of inherited behaviours. At the opening scene of the play, he also refers to the same idea when he rebukes Nora for her luxury: "... It is in the blood; for indeed it is true that you can inherit these things, Nora!" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 9) but Nora at that time had no problem and she was happy, so she replies: "I wish I had inherited many of Papa's qualities" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 9). This contrast between Nora's light-hearted reply and Helmer's serious insistence foreshadows the patriarchal trap: what Nora sees as harmless, Helmer later weaponizes as proof of her inherent corruption.

Dr Rank and Nora share the same suffering. Dr Rank acts as the physical embodiment of Nora's feelings –i.e. she judges herself by the mores of her society and views herself as morally corrupt. Nora lives in a patriarchal society, so her domineering husband makes her get such a sense of moral corruption. Nora is not only morally corrupt because of her forgery, but also because of her marriage. Her character, both as an individual and as a woman, has been completely shaped—and in some ways corrupted—by the pressure to meet social expectations of an obedient wife. Dr Rank's physical illness reaches its climax along with Nora's moral as well as emotional illness. Dr Rank gives us an idea about the level of anxiety and horror that Nora faces. He confirms Nora's fear of inherited corruption by saying: "... To have to pay this penalty for another man's sin! Is there any justice in that? And in every single family, in one way or another, some such inexorable retribution is being exacted" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 49). Nora covers her ears and says: "Rubbish!" as if to prevent hearing the references to her own life and children. She feels that whatever Dr Rank has said can be applied to her situation. Dr Rank voices the fear of hereditary determinism, but Nora experiences it as patriarchal determinism: her life is defined by her father's and husband's authority.

Nora is really disappointed when Krogstad drops into Helmer's letterbox a letter containing all the facts about her deal with him. Ibsen depicts Nora's feelings of disappointment by referring to the tarantella dance (poison-spider dance) with the help of which Nora hopelessly tries to get rid of her feelings of moral corruption. She expresses her deep feeling of anxiety in the dance. Her clothes, the Italian costume and her large black shawl develop the theme of disease, combining the effects of celebration and death. This tarantella performance displays the dance of death and the dark thoughts and images that occupy her mind. The image is further emphasised by pulling her black shawl before deserting the house (Batool, 2019, p. 131). The black shawl suggests her thoughts of suicide to end her guilty conscience. Nora tries to be free from her anxiety by the tarantella dance, considering it her last fling as she broods over the prospect of ending her life. Similarly, Dr Rank also enjoys drinking his last champagne at the party. The final correspondence between Dr Rank and Nora means that by the end of the play, Nora's fate is paired with Dr Rank's. They are both victims of circumstances. Dr Rank's dropping the card later helps Nora to steel herself towards her final departure, to end her life so as

not to pollute her children by her moral corruption. She wants to get rid of the idea of corrupting her children, which is suggested by her husband. She compares her moral corruption with Dr Rank's hereditary disease and Krogstad's dishonesty. The tarantella becomes a symbolic performance of Nora's entrapment within patriarchal expectations. Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance clarifies this moment: "Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; … the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions" (1999, p. 178). In her frantic dance, Nora enacts the very "doll" identity society has scripted for her, yet by exposing the artificiality of that performance, she transforms it into an act of resistance against her oppression.

Another correlation between hereditary disease and moral corruption can be realised in taking Dr Rank's illness as a physical embodiment of Helmer's moral illness. Dr Rank seems as a bewildered victim of biological determinism; however, Helmer appears a helpless victim of social determinism, unable to act freely outside the social code. Both of them are concerned with moral attitudes. As Dr Rank does not allow anyone to witness his "final dissolution" as a result of disease, so he decides to die in private; similarly, Helmer tends to maintain an appearance "at any rate" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 72) when he determines Nora's disease, of which he is the victim. Ibsen depicts Helmer as a victim of a morally corrupt society who likes to dominate his wife and treat her as a doll. His gender has assigned him a role within patriarchal society, in which he is concerned with his position at work and avoids social degradation. Here, Ibsen shows that patriarchy harms men as well as women: Helmer is trapped in the performance of masculinity, prioritising appearances over empathy. Yet the burden of corruption still falls most heavily on Nora, illustrating how patriarchy distributes suffering unequally. As Moosa and Noori argue in their study of Miller's *A View from the Bridge*, patriarchal structures place the male figure at the center of authority within the family, creating a system in which women internalize societal expectations and lose their own identity (2008, p. 10).

**Emancipation as Resistance to the Sickroom**

Helmer's reaction to the disclosure of Nora's secret comes as a great shock to her. Emma Goldman refers to Nora's expectations about her husband, saying: "she worships her husband, believes in him implicitly, and is sure that if ever her safety should be menaced, Torvald, her idol, her god, would perform the miracle" (1914, p. 1). Yet, his reaction comes against her expectations about her husband. While she expected him to take the entire blame of her guilty action upon himself, he says: "I'm man enough to take everything upon myself" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 47); he explodes into violent rage. His compliments of love, "my little skylark" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 7), "songbird" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 34), "little squirrel" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 6), suddenly change to a "hypocrite", "a liar", "a criminal" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 76). He once again accuses her of her father's misbehaviour; "all your father's want of principle has come out in you. No religion, no morality, no sense of duty" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 77). Helmer's sudden shift from affectionate pet names to accusations of moral corruption exposes what Kate Millett describes as patriarchy's political function: affectionate domination that turns instantly into coercion when control is threatened (2000, p. 33). His reference to Nora's father illustrates again how patriarchy denies women individuality by reducing them to male inheritance. Helmer's reaction towards her forgery reveals to her the fragility of her marriage as Susan C. W. Abbotson suggests: "Nora realizes that she, too, has been the victim of a romantic dream—having expected her husband to stand by her and even nobly take the blame. She now realizes that such a wonderful thing is only fantasy" (2003, p. 262). She recognises that she was not meant to be a possession in her husband's hands; she discovers that she is a human with her own rights, not a property of her husband. "Nora refuses, in the name of freedom and truth, to remain a pillar of society, i.e., a slave of her husband's social status" (Haugen, 1979, p. 10). She tells him that both he and her father had been unfair to her. Her father used to treat her as a doll-child, while she was treated by him as a doll-wife. At her father's house, she adopted her father's views and opinions; and in her husband's home adopted her husband's views and tastes. So, she realises that the poison of moral corruption did not originate in her and she is not responsible for that corruption, but it is the result of the circumstances in which she lived: "I have been greatly wronged, Torvald-first by papa and then by you" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 81). This recognition is the

turning point: Nora identifies patriarchy itself as the hereditary disease that infects her life. Toril Moi has argued that Nora's rejection of the 'doll' identity demonstrates Ibsen's critique of gender as a social construction, not a natural flaw in women (2006, p. 227). Then she tells Helmer that now she realises that she is an individual who should be independent. In all her life, she has depended on these two authority figures, happy and satisfied in their apparent passion of love and affection. As Abbotson points out, "Nora finally learns to reject Torvald's "doll-like" image of her, as she comes to realise that this is the only way she can reclaim her humanity" (2003, p. 262). This scene embodies Joan Templeton's claim that Nora's departure is not selfishness but a radical feminist act—an insistence on female subjectivity in a society that casts women as corrupt extensions of male authority (1989, p. 34).

Nora's decision to desert her husband, her house, and her children is related to her realisation of the 'Doll's House' attitude that is the core of corruption, which must not be transmitted to future generations. She decides to leave her children because she feels that she is also treating her own children as if they were dolls. She used to address her baby as: "My sweet little baby doll!" (Ibsen, 2005, p. 26) By leaving her children, Nora rejects reproducing the patriarchal 'doll' legacy. This resonates with Butler's theory of gender performativity: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (1999, p. 33). Nora refuses to keep performing the maternal role scripted for her by patriarchy, choosing instead to unmake that performance.

Nora's behaviours are the product of society. She used to obey the social code of the patriarchal society in which she lived. The patriarchal society demands from her a complete subordination, first to her father, then to her husband. She looks at herself as a corrupted one because society forms this view in her mind. The moral corruption is not inside Nora, but it is part of the patriarchal society. This moral corruption reflects the weaknesses and flaws of such a society. Nora, as a female, finds herself forced to face social expectations and demands which are associated with women's submission to men. Towards the end of the play, she reveals herself as an "emancipated woman…. Her protest against her husband's possessive attitude towards her symbolizes the feminine

revolt against male domination" (Lall, 2006, p. 148). She searches for self-identity because she cannot conform to the codes of the male-dominated society, which shows her as morally corrupt. Nora's departure redefines the metaphor of disease: she is not the infection, as Helmer claims, but the cure—her resistance exposes patriarchy itself as the hereditary sickness that destroys families. In rejecting her role, she both emancipates herself and symbolically diagnoses society.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *A Doll's House* ultimately presents a society corrupted not only by individual weakness but by the patriarchal system that defines and restricts both men and women. The rigid gender roles imposed upon them—Nora as the obedient wife and mother, Helmer as the domineering husband obsessed with appearances—constitute the true immorality of the play's world. Ibsen employs the metaphor of hereditary disease to dramatise this social corruption: Dr Rank's illness is excused as unfortunate heredity, while Nora's supposed "inheritance" of her father's dishonesty is condemned as immorality. This unequal application exposes the gendered double standard of patriarchy, which medicalises male flaws but pathologises female independence.

Nora's final act of leaving her husband and children redefines the metaphor of disease. Rather than embodying corruption, she rejects the patriarchal "sickroom" that has branded her identity as diseased. Her emancipation demonstrates that the real infection is not in her blood but in the cultural system that denies her agency. Accordingly, Nora's revolt is not selfishness but a radical refusal to preserve the legacy of patriarchy. Thus, Ibsen's play establishes patriarchy itself as the hereditary disease afflicting modern society—and Nora's resistance emerges as the only possible cure.

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