



## A Cultural Materialist Approach to Gender Relations in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

Ibsen'in *Bir Bebek Evi* Adlı Oyunundaki Cinsiyet İlişkilerine Kültürel  
Materyalist Bir Yaklaşım

Şebnem DÜZGÜN\*

### Abstract

The Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) explores gender relations which were fiercely debated in the late nineteenth century. The play deals mainly with the oppression of a bourgeois woman named Nora, who forges her father's signature to save her husband's life. Regarded as a member of the inferior sex, Nora is dominated by her patriarchal-minded husband Helmer. As she lacks socio-economic freedom to earn her own money, she is forced to obey the will of her husband, who imprisons her in the domestic sphere where she is degraded as an ignorant, inferior being who needs intellectual and moral guidance. Moreover, Helmer manipulates his position as a wage earner and treats Nora as an object that is to be possessed and controlled. Since Helmer benefits from his 'superiority' in terms of his gender and economic position, he represents both a domineering patriarch and a manipulative capitalist master. However, Nora is not depicted as a passive receiver of male domination for she develops counter discourses against her husband's patriarchal discourses which focus on the inferiority of the female sex. Frustrated with the dominant moral and legal discourses of patriarchy that despise women, Nora decides to move from the restrictive domestic world to the outside world of power, money, and business. Her removal from the domestic sphere where she is expected to perform certain normative roles associated with the female sex is important in that it heralds women's emancipation from male domination. The present study examines *A Doll's House* from a cultural materialist perspective to argue that Nora's departure from her husband's house is not only a personal experience but a social challenge against the dominant patriarchal capitalist culture.

**Keywords:** Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, cultural materialism, gender, power, patriarchal domination, female resistance

### Öz

Norveçli yazar Henrik Ibsen'in *Bir Bebek Evi* (1879), on dokuzuncu yüzyılın sonlarında hararetle tartışılan toplumsal cinsiyet ilişkilerini irdeler. Oyun, esas olarak kocasının hayatını kurtarmak için babasının imzasını taklit eden Nora adındaki burjuva sınıfa mensup bir kadının baskıya maruz kalmasını ele alır. Alt seviyedeki bir cinsiyet grubunun üyesi olarak düşünülen Nora, ataerkil zihniyete sahip olan kocası Helmer tarafından yönetilir. Kendi parasını kazanmak için gereken sosyo-ekonomik özgürlükten yoksun olduğu için, kendisini eve hapsederek entelektüel ve ahlaki rehberliğe ihtiyacı olan cahil, aşağılık bir varlık olarak küçümseyen kocasının iradesine uymaya zorlanır. Dahası, Helmer para kazanan kişi rolünü kötüye kullanır ve Nora'ya sahiplenilmesi ve kontrol edilmesi gereken bir nesne olarak davranır. Helmer, cinsiyetinin ve ekonomik konumunun getirdiği 'üstünlüğünden' yararlandığı için hem otoriter bir erkeği hem de sömürücü kapitalist bir efendiyi temsil eder. Ancak, Nora, erkek egemenliğinin edilgen bir alıcısı olarak gösterilmemiştir; çünkü kadın cinsiyetinin yetersizliğine odaklanan kocasının ataerkil söylemlerine karşı söylemler geliştirir. Kadınları aşağılayan ataerkil toplumun baskın ahlaki ve hukuki söylemlerinden usanan Nora, kısıtlayıcı eve dair meselelerle dolu iç dünyadan gücün, paranın ve iş olanaklarının bulunduğu dış dünyaya geçmeye karar verir. Kadın cinsiyeti ile ilişkilendirilen belirli normatif rolleri gerçekleştirmesi beklenen ev ortamından ayrılması, kadınların erkek egemenliğinden kurtuluşunu müjdelemesi açısından önemlidir. Bu çalışma, Nora'nın kocasının evini terk edişinin sadece

\* Dr., Atılım University, Ankara, Turkey, e-mail: duzugunsebnem@gmail.com

kişisel bir deneyim olmadığını aynı zamanda baskın ataerkil kapitalist kültüre karşı sosyal bir karşı çıkış olduğunu savunmak için *Bir Bebek Evi*'ni kültürel materyalist bir açıdan inceler.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Ibsen, *Bir Bebek Evi*, kültürel materyalizm, cinsiyet, güç, ataerkil hâkimiyet, kadın direnişi

## Introduction

*A Doll's House* (1879) is a realistic play by the Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen, which demonstrates the ideological operation of power in the context of gender relations. The play displays the disempowerment of women in the male-dominated society of the late nineteenth century, but it also points to the possibility of the subversion of the oppressive patriarchal ideology that regards women as inferior through the resistance and counter arguments of a middle-class woman who has been degraded by her father and husband. The present study examines *A Doll's House* from a cultural materialist perspective to be able to understand the power struggles between a patriarchal, bourgeois man who supports the dominant, patriarchal ideology, and his wife who tries to subvert the established discourses of capitalist patriarchal society. In so doing, the study aims to argue that Nora's challenge against patriarchal oppression has not only personal but also socio-political dimensions in that it unsettles the traditional patriarchal capitalist structure that is based on the superiority of 'rational' men.

Developed in the late 1970s and 1980s by such critics as Raymond Williams, Jonathan Dollimore, and Allan Sinfield, cultural materialism aims to find out "the ways in which texts contain the seeds of opposition to the dominant structures they embody" (Taylor, 2013, p. 163). Cultural materialists deal with the texts from a materialist view because they reject the traditional idealist idea "that literary criticism exists in a privileged scholarly realm 'above' politics," and they argue "all readings are political readings" since critics should consider the socio-economic and political circumstances in which texts are written (Marlow, 2017, p. 2). Raymond Williams (1960) maintains that as literature is not just an intellectual pursuit but a part of the dynamic cultural system, it is related to such cultural forms as "history," "philosophy," "political and social theory," "institutions," "manners," and "customs" (pp. 272-273). Emphasizing the socio-political aspects of texts, cultural materialism is associated with Marxism. Marx and Engels (2004) assert that all kinds of ideologies, like religious, moral, and philosophical ideologies, are just "[t]he phantoms formed in the human brain" because people do not have their own ideologies, but it is the dominant social class that impose their ideologies on individuals (p. 47). They also believe that material, economic reality shapes "the cultural 'superstructure' of ideas, politics, arts and so forth" (Barker, 2004, p. 39). Cultural materialists also benefit from Foucault's ideas to explain power relations based on an ideological structure (Brannigan, 2016, p. 36). Foucault (1990) claims that ideologies and phenomena, like sexuality and madness, are produced and reproduced by "a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state" (p. 94). Therefore, he assumes that power relations are based on a hierarchal structure. While those at the top have "the right to know", those at the bottom are "forced to remain ignorant" (Foucault, 1990, p. 99). However, Foucault believes that the power relationships alter according to the changes in ideologies, thus the dominant culture might be transformed and reversed as a result of "ceaseless struggles and confrontations" (1990, p. 94).

Influenced by Marxist and Foucauldian philosophies, cultural materialists study the role of power and ideology in forming cultural and material relationships and pay attention to "the clash between dominant cultural forms and dissident ideas" (Marlow 1). Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (2002), two notable cultural materialists, consider ideology to be "composed of those beliefs, practices, and institutions which work to legitimate the social order" (p. 213). In *Radical Tragedy*, Dollimore (2010) asserts that ideology is "the very terms in which we perceive the world," and it is manipulated by the dominant groups to perpetuate their power (p. 9). Having a political stance, cultural materialism "wants to help make a difference" about the situation of "marginalized gender, sexual, racial, political and religious groups" (Marlow 3). Raymond Williams (1977) claims that although the dominant culture shapes people's ideas and beliefs, it might be confronted by new cultural elements that are "substantially alternative or oppositional to it," thus he believes

that “no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy and human intention” (pp. 123, 125). Likewise, Alan Sinfield (2001) argues for a dissident reading of literary texts to find “the faultlines and breaking points” through which the ideology of the dominant is subverted (p. 9). For instance, Dollimore (2010) studies Shakespeare’s plays to explain “[h]ow Shakespeare has been used to sustain delusions of social unity and subjective freedom in what is in fact a divided, strife-ridden culture” (p. lxxxii). In so doing, he concludes that although literary texts have “the language, forms, conventions [and] genres” that are formed and controlled by the ideologies of their own time, clashes, conflicts and incoherence in the texts devitalize the validity of the common ideology (2010, p. 277).

Ibsen acknowledges the ideological nature of women’s assumed inferiority in *A Doll's House*. Women’s marginalisation in the nineteenth century was an ideological operation conducted by patriarchal authorities for the sustenance of male-dominated society. In this age, women were “placed on a pedestal and worshiped” as representatives of morality (Nassaar, 2004, p. 95). While they were “seen as moral guides confined to the home,” men were acknowledged “as worldly creatures who often compromised their domestic roles in favour of work or public life” (Carlisle, 2004, p. 182). Therefore, middle-class women were unable to join the work force until the mid-nineteenth century (Caine, 1997). Women’s inability to participate in the public sphere as paid workers was manipulated to justify “patriarchal power of men over women and of income-earning fathers and husbands over wives and children, who were supposed to be economically inactive” (Szreter & Fisher, 2010, p. 34). However, Harriet Martineau (2007), an eminent British sociologist, argues that women should leave the domestic sphere to obtain their freedom, and thus, she appreciates women who “are obtaining access to real social business” (p. 304). Harriet Taylor Mill (1998), a nineteenth-century feminist writer, also claims that women should earn money to be emancipated from patriarchal domination: “[A] woman who contributes materially to the support of the family, cannot be treated in the same contemptuously tyrannical manner as one who, however she may toil as a domestic drudge, is a dependent on the man for subsistence” (pp. 60-61).

In the nineteenth century, women were also viewed as biologically inferior to men, and it was claimed “there is a difference in the minds of men and women corresponding to the difference in their bodily organisation” (Becker, 2002, p. 14). Boyle (1874) argues that as men have superior bodily and mental strengths, works that require physical and intellectual power are given to men: “The sterner duties of life, even in our days of advanced civilization, are such as require the man’s greater physical strength and physical and mental endurance. The time has not yet come for women to labour in the same field and under the same conditions as men” (p. 85). Therefore, lower-class women, who had the opportunity to work outside the domestic sphere, were employed only “in factories or as seamstresses or servants, and were paid very low wages” (Nassaar, 2004, p. 95). Rebecca West (as cited in Debenham, 2013), a nineteenth-century writer, criticises the gender wage gap and contends that “[t]he real reason why women ... are paid less highly than men who are performing the same work is the desire felt by the mass of men that women in general should be subjected to every possible disadvantage” (p. 37). Therefore, although women had job opportunities, nineteenth-century patriarchal ideology still degraded women and argued that they should provide domestic care for their husbands and children instead of being wage-earners (Rossi, 1970).

The marriage institution in the nineteenth century also restricted women’s liberty since it was men who were family heads in a patriarchal family, and women were viewed as men’s properties, and they depended on men for “emotional support or practical advice” (McDowall, 1989, p. 19). As women were reduced to commodities, married women could not have their own properties which “came under the husband’s exclusive control during their joint lives” (Wroath, 1998, p. 9). Women’s ‘inferiority’ was enforced not only by legal discourse, but also by religious discourse. In *Ephesians*, St Paul argues that women, the weaker, inferior sex, should surrender themselves to the will of their husbands who are mentally, physically, and morally superior: “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church ... Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (2003, p. 1293). Since a woman was

regarded as inferior, her properties and body were controlled and subjugated by her husband who was given the right to “have sexual intercourse with her [his wife] regardless of her consent” (Wroath, 1998, p. 10). Unable to defy male domination on their bodies and personal belongings, women were treated like slaves who were manipulated by their masters. In *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill (1870) criticises women’s degradation to servility: “Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law. There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house” (p. 147).

Rejecting to be regarded as weak, subordinate, and fragile creatures, women from Europe and the United States fought for equal socio-economic and legal rights, namely the rights “to gainful employment, education and training, to own property, and to play a role in the political life of their nations, as voters and as candidates to political office” (Gibbon, 2004, p. 261). Norwegian women, especially from lower classes, also struggled for equal rights in the late nineteenth century. They demanded laws protecting them as workers and fought for the right to receive university education, and for having equal legal and political rights (Edge Hill University, 2014). Women’s attempts to acquire the same rights as men proved to be successful, and Norway became “the first sovereign state to give full citizenships rights to women, a process that began in 1901 and ended with full suffrage ... for all women in 1913” (Hansen & Wold, 2007, p. 701). Having introduced the social background of gender issue in the late nineteenth century, the present study continues with the examination of the relationship between gender and power in *A Doll’s House*.

### **Patriarchal Oppression and Female Resistance**

Revealing the capitalist patriarchal ideology of the nineteenth century, *A Doll’s House* mainly deals with the story of Nora, a bourgeois woman who is exposed to male domination. Nora is expected by her husband to be an obedient wife and a good mother, but she becomes frustrated by the oppressive social structure that does not give her a chance to assert her individuality. She becomes even more frustrated when her husband scolds her for forging her father’s signature to get a loan to ensure his recovery from an illness caused by overwork. Therefore, she leaves her house, her children, and her husband, who treats her like a doll, to find out her real identity. Nora’s struggle against patriarchal oppression helps Ibsen to articulate about women’s issue. Concerned about women’s socio-economic and legal problems, Ibsen bases Nora’s story on the real-life story of Laura Kieler, who, like Nora, borrowed some money through forgery to save her husband’s life (G. J. Williams, 2010). However, Kieler, unlike Nora, cannot leave her husband when her forgery is discovered but instead, she is put into an asylum as a kind of punishment for her disregard for the moral and legal laws of a patriarchal community (G. J. Williams, 2010). As such, Nora takes “precisely the step that real women could not imagine, let alone take” because nineteenth-century women, who did not have any economic freedom, could not leave their houses which were considered proper places for the females by patriarchal authorities (Ibsen as cited in G. J. Williams, 2010, p. 415).

Torvald Helmer<sup>1</sup>, the male protagonist in *A Doll’s House*, represents a typical patriarch whose ideology about gender has been shaped by nineteenth-century socio-cultural environment. Helmer wants Nora to be an ideal mother and a wife who is obedient, happy and cheerful; therefore, he cannot bear to see her “out of temper” or “uneasy,” qualities which he attributes to the aggressive male nature (Ibsen, 1910, pp. 7, 9). He also wants Nora to act like a traditional woman whose only concern is to fulfil her domestic duties like dealing with the servants, managing the household tasks, and bringing up children. Hence, he disagrees with Nora who wishes to have “inherited many of papa’s qualities” because according to him women cannot have manly traits (Ibsen, 1910, p. 9). Moreover, Helmer views women as ignorant and childish creatures. Therefore, he rebukes Nora for her idea to get a loan for Christmas expenses. Helmer says that she does not care about how they will repay and adds “[t]hat is like a woman,” suggesting that women are ignorant about economic affairs (Ibsen, 1910, p. 6).

Foucault (1990), an eminent figure in cultural materialism, argues that there is “[an] order of sexuality” in society, and in this order men, adults, parents, and doctors are the ones who have the power

<sup>1</sup> Torvald is also called Helmer in the play.

and “the right to know” whereas women, adolescents, children, and patients are the ones who are deprived of power and “forced to remain ignorant” (p. 95). In this respect, Helmer, a member of the ‘superior’ sexual group, feels the right to control Nora, whom he calls “little featherhead” and “poor little girl” that needs his help and guidance (Ibsen, 1910, pp. 6, 10). Accordingly, he interferes with how she spends money, how she dresses and dances. He accuses his wife of “spend[ing] money recklessly,” and “takes her playfully by the ear” for “wasting money” (Ibsen, 1910, p. 6). He also does not allow Nora to eat macaroon since he does not want her to have carious and damaged teeth, thus he “wags his finger at Nora” as if she were a little girl to reproach for “breaking rules” about macaroons (Ibsen, 1910, p. 9). Helmer’s desire to control his wife can be read as a struggle to preserve his position as the dominant family figure in a period when the firm patriarchal society started to be shaken by several women’s movements in the nineteenth century. Therefore, according to Helmer and the patriarchal authorities he represents, the outside world which witnesses the power struggles between men and women is not safe for a bourgeois wife. He thinks the proper place for Nora and other women is home which is “only ... bearable for a mother” (Ibsen, 1910, p. 25).

Helmer is also a representative of capitalist ideology which gives rich men the authority to subdue and abuse those who are in an economically inferior position. Marx (2009) argues that in a capitalist society money functions as “an individualistic power” which gives its possessor the power to control and oppress the ones that do not possess it (p. 159). As a capitalist patriarchal man, Helmer believes that women who are ignorant about economy do not have the right to have their own money so he manages the economic affairs of the household by himself. He reveals his mistrust about women’s capacity about economy through disparaging Nora for her imprudence about spending money on Christmas presents:

NORA. ... Come in here, Torvald, and see what I have bought.

HELMER. Don’t disturb me. (*A little later, he opens the door and looks into the room, pen in hand.*) Bought, did you say? All these things? Has my little spendthrift been wasting money again?

NORA. Yes but, Torvald, this year we really can let ourselves go a little. This is the first Christmas that we have not needed to economise.

HELMER. Still, you know, we can’t spend money recklessly. (Ibsen, 1910, p. 6)

Accusing Nora of wasting money, Helmer struggles to define himself as a rational man who is superior to his ‘illogical’ wife. Moreover, he manipulates Nora’s economic dependence to restrict her freedom. Since he is the money-earner, he feels that he can control Nora, who is a non-earning domestic labourer. Accordingly, he enjoys his power over her through giving her the money she needs in a playful way as if he gives pocket money to his little daughter:

HELMER (*taking out his purse*). Nora, what do you think I have got here?

NORA (*turning round quickly*). Money!

HELMER. There you are. (*gives her some money.*) (Ibsen, 1910, p. 7)

Having given the money, Helmer continues to exert his control over Nora through warning her not to “spend it all on the housekeeping and any number of unnecessary things” (Ibsen, 1910, p. 8). He accepts to give her money on condition that she spend it on “something reasonable,” therefore he does not want her to buy gifts for their children and maids (Ibsen, 1910, p. 7). As a pragmatic, capitalist man he compels Nora to consider only her own needs and “buy something for [herself]” rather than thinking about others (Ibsen, 1910, p. 8). However, Nora is not a passive recipient of Helmer’s manipulative power for she attempts to subvert the traditional middle-class family structure in which it is man, not woman, who works and earns money by doing needlework and copying documents secretly. She tells Mrs Linde, her childhood friend, that she got pleasure from being able to earn her own money: “Many a time I was desperately tired; but all the same it was a tremendous pleasure to sit there working and earning money. It was like being a man”

(Ibsen, 1910, p. 19). Since Nora equates earning money with being free like men, she enjoys her quasi-economic freedom achieved at the expense of being imprisoned within the domestic sphere.

Capitalist ideology designates money as a vehicle to possess “freedom” and “beauty” (Marx, 2009, pp. 145, 160). Since Helmer’s mind is shaped by capitalist ideology, he makes a connection between money, beauty, and freedom: “No debt, no borrowing. There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt” (Ibsen, 1910, p. 7). As he associates poverty with ugliness and servility, he rejects Nora’s wish to borrow some money for making up for Christmas expenses. However, Nora produces a counter discourse which associates beauty not with money but with “[a] happy house” (Ibsen, 1910, p. 18). Moreover, for her, freedom is not a material entity to be purchased by money, but it is “to be able to play and romp with the children; to be able to keep the house beautifully,” and also “[to be able to see] the big blue sky” (Ibsen, 1910, p. 20).

Having a capitalist materialist perspective, Helmer materialises Nora’s body. He treats Nora as a pretty object that gives him pleasure. Therefore, he frequently reminds Nora of paying attention to her appearance and wants her not to “ruin [her] dear eyes and [her] pretty little hands” by overwork (Ibsen, 1910, p.10). He also dehumanises Nora by regarding her as an entity to be possessed. He claims right over her body as she is “[his] dearest treasure” and “the beauty that is [his], all [his] very own” (Ibsen, 1910, p. 69). In this way, he justifies his desire to have control on her body as her husband/master. However, Nora opposes his authority by repelling his sexual advances:

HELMER. ... When I watched the seductive figures of the Tarantella, my blood was on fire;  
I could endure it no longer, and that was why I brought you down so early—

NORA. Go away, Torvald! You must let me go. I won’t—

HELMER. What’s that? You’re joking, my little Nora! You won’t—you won’t? Am I not  
your husband? (Ibsen, 1910, p. 70)

Rejecting Helmer’s oppression, Nora challenges patriarchal capitalist discourse that empowers the strong to rule the weak. In so doing, she uses her self-will and does not allow her body to be violated by the moneyed husband who tries to inflict his manly power on her.

Raymond Williams (2006) argues that a cultural materialist viewpoint focuses not on the individual but on the social institutions for an individual’s life is subject to the socio-economic environment, and it is not human beings but socio-economic systems that shape the fates of individuals. In *A Doll’s House*, Nora’s life is controlled especially by her father and husband, who represent the patriarchal institution of family. Helmer, who treats Nora like a doll-wife, represents also the patriarchal institution of marriage because he thinks that Nora’s duties as a bourgeois wife are to obey her husband, to take care of her children, and to deal with domestic affairs. On the other hand, the life of Mrs Linde, Nora’s friend, is shaped by the patriarchal capitalist system which forces a lower-class woman, like her, either to marry a rich man or to take “low paying domestic jobs, teaching, or clerical work” (Edge Hill University, 2014, p.14). Furthermore, she has to leave the man whom she loves to marry a rich old man to support her ill mother and young brothers. After her husband’s death, she does “anything [she] could find- first a small shop, then a small school, and so on” (Ibsen, 1910, p. 14). Anne-Marie, the nurse of the Helmers’s children, is also subjugated within the patriarchal system which gives no chance to an unmarried mother to find a decent job. As she knew that she could not lead a respectable life with her illegitimate daughter, she left her “among strangers” to find “a good place” where she can work (Ibsen, 1910, p. 38).

The female characters in the play appear to be trapped within the authoritarian and manipulative patriarchal system, but Ibsen suggests a potential for change in the condition of women. The writer’s suggestion can be explained by Foucauldian theory on power relations. Foucault (1990) argues that the dominant exerts their power over the dominated to ensure their superiority, however, he adds that “[w]here there is power, there is resistance” (p. 95). Foucault (1990) believes that resistance shown by the subordinate or the inferior produces a possibility of reversal in power relations:

[The existence of power relations] depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance... But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat.... [I]t is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible. (pp. 95-96)

Since the dominated have the adequacy to oppose the dominant's power, power relations between the superior and inferior groups are not stable. To illustrate, having patriarchal and capitalist powers, Helmer tries to gain mastery over Nora in order to secure his position in the family as the superior in terms of his gender and economic position. However, Nora develops a counter power by challenging her husband and his discriminative discourses. Helmer calls Nora "little soul" and "extravagant little person" as he considers her a small, pretty, and fragile creature ignorant about economy and the life outside (Ibsen, 1910, pp. 8, 7). However, Nora contradicts her husband's claims through developing a silent resistance. She does needlework and embroidery, and copies documents secretly to pay the money she borrowed. Helmer also regards Nora as a "thoughtless" creature having "whims and caprices" since she wants him to borrow some money to travel in the south (Ibsen, 1910, p. 18). Although Torvald thinks that Nora wants the money to have fun, Nora, in fact, wants the journey for his sake as doctors have advised her about taking her husband to the south to help him overcome his illness caused by overwork. The fact that Nora borrows the money for the journey through forgery can be read as a silent, counter response to her husband's ideas about her because through this act she proves that she is not actually a capricious or selfish person. Nora prefers to develop silent resistances until Helmer condemns her fiercely for forgery. When she understands that her husband places family reputation before her, she openly confronts him and patriarchal ideology he and her father represent:

When I was at home with papa, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed from him I concealed the fact, because he would not have liked it. He called me his doll-child, and he played with me ... And when I came to live with you ... I was simply transferred from papa's hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste, and so I got the same tastes as you or else I pretended to ... You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life. (Ibsen, 1910, p. 80)

Accusing her father and her husband of not giving her a chance to express her own will, and to lead her own life, the female protagonist defies patriarchal ideology that shows men as rational, knowledgeable beings that should control women who are 'inferior' in terms of mind and body.

### **Shutting the Door: A Challenge to Patriarchal Domination**

Nora's resistance to patriarchal oppression implies the possibility of reversal in gender relations. Changes in the relations between opposite groups are explained by Sinfield (2001), who claims that as "[the] relations between economic, political, military and cultural power" are not "harmonious" or "coherent" but "uneven" and "changing," there is a possibility of change in the relationship between the dominant and marginal groups (p. 9). Evaluated from a cultural materialist perspective, *A Doll's House* is optimistic in that it argues that the oppressed can win over the oppressor. The final scene of the play is important in that it shows the change in the power relations between Helmer and Nora. In this scene, "[t]he sound of a door shutting is heard from below," which implies Nora's leaving the house, and Helmer "sinks down on a chair at the door and buries his face in his hands" (Ibsen, 1910, p. 86). The change in Nora's and Helmer's positions is striking since until the final scene, Nora is restricted to the domestic sphere to deal with domestic affairs. Helmer, on the other hand, is rarely seen at home as he has a life beyond it: He occupies the public sphere where he works and earns money. He owes his power largely to the outside world as it is the place where bourgeois men, like him, are considered to be the possessors of the capital as well as the masters of women. However, in the final scene Nora and Helmer change roles for this time it is Helmer who is left in the domestic area and put into a weaker position: Sitting on the chair, he shouts desperately after his wife.

On the other hand, Nora is shown as a strong-willed, reasonable being who denies her role as an obedient, selfless wife and mother. Being about to leave the oppressive domestic sphere, she explains to her husband why she has decided to leave him:

[O]ur home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa's doll-child ... That is what our marriage has been, Torvald... I must try and educate myself you are not the man to help me in that. I must do that for myself. And that is why I am going to leave you now. (Ibsen, 1910, pp. 80-81)

Nora explicitly says that she has been controlled first by her father and then by her husband who just consider her as an object rather than an individual who has her own will. She also explains that she no longer wants to be a doll guided by others but to be a free individual that can “educate” herself (Ibsen, 1910, p. 81).

Foucault (1990) contends that a change, shift or revolution can be achieved through resistances that “are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior” (p. 96). Therefore, Nora's decision to leave her house, her husband, and her children should not be read as a personal rebellion having no effect on the subversion of the patriarchal social structure, for it is a rebellion which promises a possibility of change in power relations between the male and female sexes. At first, Helmer tries to deter Nora from leaving him by reminding her of her duties as a wife and mother, adopting patriarchal discourse:

HELMER. Before all else, you are a wife and a mother.

NORA. I don't believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are or, at all events, that I must try and become one. I know quite well, Torvald, that most people would think you right, and that views of that kind are to be found in books; but I can no longer content myself with what most people say, or with what is found in books. I must think over things for myself and get to understand them. (Ibsen, 1910, p. 82)

Nora defies patriarchal discourse defended by Helmer through developing a counter discourse and says that her first duty is not to her husband or to her children but to herself as she must find out her real identity without considering the stereotypical ideas on women. Later, Helmer uses religious discourse to change his wife's mind, but he fails. Nora says that she does not trust religion whose principles have been established by clergymen defending patriarchal morality:

HELMER. Can you not understand your place in your own home? Have you not a reliable guide in such matters as that? Have you no religion?

NORA. I am afraid, Torvald, I do not exactly know what religion is.

Helmer. What are you saying?

NORA. I know nothing but what the clergyman said ... He told us that religion was this, and that, and the other. When I am away from all this, and am alone ... I will see if what the clergyman said is true, or at all events if it is true for me. (Ibsen, 1910, p. 82)

Nora challenges her husband who manipulates religious discourse to inflict his power by questioning the validity of patriarchal religious discourse which turns women into inferior, domestic creatures. Her challenge is important in that she defies both the patriarchal authorities represented by her domineering husband and the religious authorities that restrict female autonomy. Nora also subverts legal ideology that condemns her for saving her husband's life through forgery: “I am learning, too, that the law is quite another thing from what I supposed; but I find it impossible to convince myself that the law is right. According to it a woman has no right to spare her old dying father, or to save her husband's life. I can't believe that” (Ibsen,



1910, p. 83). In these respects, Nora not only questions the dominant patriarchal moral, religious, and legal ideologies but also subverts them through producing counter arguments.

Nora's success in challenging patriarchal oppression gives her a chance to achieve a more equal dialogue with her husband. When Helmer understands that Nora is quite determined to leave him, he softens his strict, oppressive patriarchal discourse; he claims that he will struggle to "become a different man" and offers to fill "[the] abyss ... opened between [them]" (Ibsen, 1910, p. 85). Nora, on the other hand, does not believe that they can start a new relationship based on equal power relations, and says that Helmer can change only if "[his] doll is taken away from [him]" (Ibsen, 1910, p. 85). Therefore, she leaves him and refuses to be a doll controlled by the patriarchal authorities governing the spheres of domesticity, morality, and religion. Furthermore, Nora's leaving her husband by shutting the door behind her is important as it is a sign of defying not only the patriarchal authority but also the capitalist system since Helmer represents both patriarchal and capitalist powers. It also shows that power relations are not fixed but flexible and dynamic, which suggests the possibility of the subversion of social norms established according to patriarchal capitalist ideology.

## **Conclusion**

In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen exposes the conflict between dominant socio-economic discourses of men and the 'subordinate' discourses of women mainly through the situation of Nora, a middle-class woman who is prevailed by patriarchal discourses of gender, morality, religion, economy, and law. The female protagonist is given the identities of a compassionate mother, an obedient daughter, and wife by the male-dominated society that restricts both her individual and economic freedoms by trapping her in the domestic sphere. Nora's subjection has two dimensions as she is exposed both to patriarchal and capitalist powers. She is sexually and economically degraded by her husband Helmer who regards himself superior in terms of his gender and financial status. Helmer tries to control Nora by claiming himself as the head of his family who is responsible for the management of financial matters. He also abuses his economic power like a capitalist master to dominate his wageless wife. While Helmer confirms his position as a capitalist patriarch, he imprisons Nora within the domestic sphere where she has the role of an inferior, dependent creature whose sole task is to look after her children and husband.

Since Nora is devoid of socio-economic independence to get rid of her restrictive domestic roles, she has to obey her husband whom she relies on for sustenance. However, she refuses her given identities once she understands the failures of the dominant social system. When Helmer condemns Nora for imitating her father's signature to borrow money for his recovery, she gets aware of the fact that her husband is a mouthpiece of the conventional discourses of law, religion, and morality. Hence, she decides to form a new individual identity for herself by rejecting her imposed domestic identity. Accordingly, Nora moves away from the restricting and oppressing domestic sphere where she does not have any autonomy and authority to the world outside so as to discover her real self. Her challenge against patriarchal oppression, on the other hand, disrupts the patriarchal hegemony and heralds a chance of transformation in established gender power relationships.

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