



Tenets of Existential Feminism in Ibsen's Play, A Doll's House

AISHWARYA PATEL

Ph.D. Scholar,

Sabarmati University, Ahmedabad Gujarat (India)

DR. SHALINI SHARMA

Associate Professor, English Department

Sabarmati University, Ahmedabad. Gujarat (India)

Abstract:

Existential feminism is a very interesting philosophy which focuses on the existential frustration faced by women. There are tons of literatures that deal with the issues of feminism and the quest for identity. Women should have the freedom to choose their course of action and determine what their lives would be. However, the strict patriarchal society that we live in, does not always allow this freedom to women and dictates false standards of living. The purpose of this scholarly paper is to bring to light what is meant by existential feminism and how it is so wonderfully reflected in Ibsen's play, 'A Doll's House'. The paper aims to study Nora's rebellion for an authentic and meaningful life. It also sheds light on the strict patriarchal system that governs the lives of women. The paper takes into consideration the philosophies formed by Sartre, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Camus and Simone de Beauvoir to make strong and relevant arguments.

Keywords: *Existential feminism, A Dolls House, Authenticity, Actualization, Rebellion*

1. Existential Feminism

Existential feminism was born when Simone de Beauvoir rightly quoted in *Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 283). This phenomenal piece of literature was originally published in 1949 in French and later translated into English in 1953 and then again in 2009. It was the first time when the condition of women was seen from an existential point of view. Simone de Beauvoir has very skilfully written this book and explained how the label of 'other' becomes acceptable in the society which proudly considers men and women as equal. However, the truth that men continue to be more equal than women in so many different ways. Woman's inferior status is well accepted by the society at large that her being the 'other' gender was also not refuted for a very long time. Women have been suppressed and deprived of their rightful place in the society for a very long time. In India, women were treated like property along with the lands and cattle in the past. Even in epics like Mahabharata, we witness the Pandavas losing Draupadi to the Kauravas in the game of dice. After betting and losing all the properties, the Pandavas played their last chance, betting their own wife. A woman has been treated like a doll, first in the hands of her father and later in the hands of her husband since a very long time now.

Existential feminism is also known as "feminist existentialism" works with the understanding that, woman is nothing more than a product of social and cultural construct and largely accepted notion that woman is 'other'. Beauvoir very rightly argues that nature marks absolutely no difference between the abilities of men and women. Her body should not come in the way of how she is treated in the society and yet women continue to be oppressed in patriarchal societies. It is society that has very systematically defined the roles for men and women. The conditioning that happens on the two genders in their fundamental years is very deep and is then played out throughout their adult lives. Human beings always have a choice; thus, we have the freedom to choose our gender too. However, the society comes in our way and severely disrupt this freedom. Situation is crucial for one's

development. However, some existentialists like Sartre pay more attention to the fact that individuals are always in position to choose than situation (Kruks 43-71).

As per the principles of existential feminism, it brings to the forefront the ideas of engagement and responsibility. Both of these notions pull the women out of the inferior position that they occupy in the existing system by liberating them from the false societal standards. Jean-Paul Sartre very rightly quoted, "Existence precedes Essence" (Sartre 26). These three words summarize to certain extent the existential philosophy. Human beings do not have any pre-established identity that should govern their roles in the society. In fact, they are free to choose their actions and become what they want by living authentically and not by the norms that are determined by the society. Furthermore, human beings are so absolutely free that there is no other way in which their existence can be defined. As a matter of fact, they must accept complete responsibility for the choices that they make and the actions that they perform. They must not give into 'bad faith' and must look for means and ways to rise above unacceptable situations.

As per the existentialists, human beings can liberate themselves only if they transcend. Simone de Beauvoir has produced literary and philosophical works around the fact that women should attain freedom by breaking the shackles. Women must have the knowledge of self which becomes very vital. They must develop their own language. Despite the fact that they remain members of the patriarchal system, they must revolt while being a part of the system and bring revolution if they aspire to bring about noteworthy change in their current condition. Economic independence becomes utmost important when take up areas like feminism. Toril Moi very rightly puts down, "As long as women are prevented from earning their own living, they will always be dependent of others. Women actually seek paid work, however, are confronted with class exploitation and sexist oppression at every turn . . . A painful paradox thus emerges: only work can emancipate women, yet nothing enslaves them more completely" (Moi 74).

Existential feminism has received criticism like anything else. The complicated makeup has kept the philosophy aloof and has kept it from reaching the larger interested audience. This has led to the failure in coming up with answers for the women community at large. If it were simpler and reached out more people, women across the world, who are struggling against oppression and subjugation would have found a shoulder to lean on and come up with universal solutions about fighting against the unacceptable practices and behaviours from their counterparts. Simone de Beauvoir has been highly critiqued for her strong opinions about dismissal of maternity. Nevertheless, post-modern feminism is indebted to the abundant contributions by Beauvoir. "Woman is still the other, but rather than interpreting this condition as something to be transcended, postmodern feminists proclaim its advantages" (Tong 192).

Judith Butler, a prominent gender theorist who has greatly established herself in third-wave feminism, queer theory and literary theory has written at length about the gender issues. Her most significant literary productions include, 'Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity' (1990) and 'Bodies that matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex' (1993). She has very rightly refer to de Beauvoir's idea of becoming, and opine that, "if gender is something that one becomes – but can never be – then gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or as a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort" (Butler 143).

On the grounds of existential feminism, Butler discovered that gender by itself can the capacity to become a transcendental act. This particular aspect put Butler in a position to put forward arguments about performative facets of gender. Theorists and authors who are sometimes put together under the umbrella term, "French Feminism", such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Monique Wittig, were also significantly influenced by existential investigations about the condition of

women. They each took up the notion of “women as other”, especially in their investigation of phallogocentrism, but they did so in fundamentally different ways that heralded the beginning of sexual difference theory.

Last but not the least, it is significant to remember that Simone de Beauvoir disassociated herself from the term ‘feminism’ long after her incredible work, ‘The Second Sex’ was out in the market. She reclaimed it in the year 1972 after being actively involved in feminist work with France’s Mouvement de Libération des Femmes. Thus, despite the fact that there were undoubtedly people who resonated with the idea, “existential feminism’ did not establish itself for a very long time.

2.Existential Portrayal of Nora by Henrik Ibsen

The first reading of, ‘A Doll’s House’, emphasizes the stereotypical representation of women as naïve, illogical and dependent at first glance. The figure of Torvald is interesting and the way he deals with life situations may resonate with some men in the patriarchal society. He is most of the time found in his study, pre-occupied with his work. His conversations with his wife and children barely take place. When children return from a walk, he says, “the place will only be bearable for a mother now” (Ibsen 23). Hence, the gender roles are sketched in a fantastic manner and there are no grey areas. The domestication of women is accepted as it were natural.

The character of Torvald is constructed as money-minded, logical, rational and emotionally unavailable. This is exactly how the men are expected to be in a patriarchal society. They are taught from a very early childhood to conceal their true feelings and step up as perfect. They associate with strength and masculinity. On the other hand, women are encouraged to embrace their feminine side and gracefully listen to men and do as they dictate as if they had no mind of their own. Torvald says that Nora, “has become both wife and child to him” (Ibsen 88).

The traits of existentialism came to be evident in feminist literature like, ‘A Doll’s House’, wherein we see that there is a struggle about identity quest and a search for existence by Nora. The term existentialism is used by Kierkegaard, Sartre, Nietzsche and Camus to understand the underlying problems in existence. Henrik Ibsen was a believer of individualism and rejected societal standards. We can see a lot of existential tenets in Ibsen’s works. His characters are self-asserting and he is a firm believer in freedom just like the existentialists.

Nora, finds herself under the custody of her male counterpart; first he father and then her husband. This is nothing new in a patriarchal set up where the male has an upper hand because he brings in the money and aids the economic wellbeing of the society. The woman on the other hand takes responsibility for all the household chores and raises children. She does not work any less than the male member of the family. However, her contribution is neglected because she does not earn a living. The superiority of men roots from the very fact that they earn and that is what brings the food on the table. Nora, is like any other woman, full of self-doubt and is struck by an existential dilemma. Ibsen does not label himself as a feminist and makes it very clear that his agenda was not to fight for women’s rights but to cast some light upon it. However, a lot of feminists admire him for his ground breaking work. He lived with a nationalistic spirit and worked around Europe’s social issues during the 1880’s.

The play was first published in the year 1879 and was staged in Copenhagen. Eight thousand copies were sold out and it was a big hit! There was a lot of controversy that circled around the play and Ibsen was literally compelled to come up with a different ending of the play. The play initially ended with Nora’s decision of abandoning her children and freeing herself of the inauthentic life that she had been living. The existentialists believe in the fact that human beings always have a choice to do away with what is unacceptable and put a foot down and choose the way they want to really live. They believe that human beings are free to choose the path they would like to take and have the liberty to reject the

false societal standards and pressures. Ibsen was also a firm believer of the fact that women have the right to choose and live on their own terms. However, after much controversy, he changed the ending of the play to Nora realizing that children need their mother far more than she needs her freedom. This is unfortunately a reality for so many women around the world. Most of the times, women continue to put up with marriages day-after-day even when they are not happy. The society normalizes this behaviour. If we think about it, this is a perfect set up for the patriarchal system. Women may think of this as a sacrifice for their children. However, we need to think, how human is it to normalize agony of women living in unhappy marriages for the sake of their children? Ibsen successfully brought to light the psychological distress of women by writing in a realistic fashion and not romanticizing the bleak picture.

The play critiques the nineteenth century marriage norms. The controversy revolved around Nora's existential quest and her decision to discover herself by breaking away from the societal standards of marriage. Ibsen believed that, "A woman cannot be herself in modern society" and the fact that because it is "an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a male standpoint" (Ibsen 79).

4. Conclusion

Hence, we see that Nora faces existential dilemma and that is very well highlighted by Ibsen in his play. It is a realistic picture of women's condition in a patriarchal society and actually the condition of so many women around the world who face subjugation and oppression in the name of doing what is right. The reality is that women are conditioned to think that they must not live for themselves and that they cannot put away the responsibilities that is theirs. It is not the responsibility of a woman alone to look after their children. Parenting is a shared responsibility. Besides this, it must be acknowledged that women have the rights just like the men have and they must have the liberty to choose what they want.

References

1. Beauvoir, Simone de. "The Second Sex." New York: Vintage Books, 1949.
2. Butler, Judith. "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity." New York: Routledge, 1990.
3. Kruks, Sonia. "Beauvoir: The Weight of Situation." New York: Routledge, 1998, 43–71.
4. Moi, Toril. "'Independent Women' and 'Narratives of Liberation'." New York: Routledge, 1998, 72–92.
5. Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Existentialism is a Humanism." Yale University Press, 2007.
6. Tong, Rosemarie. "Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction." Westview Press, 2014.