

Ibsen's Nora is Entrapped**MOHAMMAD A. AL-ALI**

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to explore the theme of interpersonal alienation in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). The interpersonal alienation is the kind of alienation that prevails between partners and leads to self-alienation. As partners in marriage, Nora and Thorvald in *A Doll's House* live like strangers. When she discovers the truth about her marital life, Nora decides to leave Thorvald and live for herself. In a patriarchal society, however, Nora's step implies becoming socially alienated. Ibsen shows that Nora is entrapped. In the masculine society Nora lives in, she has to choose between being self-alienated or socially ostracized. There is no third choice.

Keywords: *A Doll's House*; Nora; Thorvald; interpersonal alienation; social alienation

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the theme of alienation in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). *A Doll's House* is a play in three acts published in Norwegian. The play is about an ordinary family consisting of the husband, Thorvald – a bank lawyer - , his wife, Nora, and three children. In the play, Thorvald is the ethical member of the family while Nora is the pretty irresponsible wife who flatters her husband. Another important character in the play is Krogstad, who threatens to reveal a fraud that Nora commits without her husband's knowledge to obtain a loan she needs to save the life of her husband. When her deed is discovered, Nora is shocked because Thorvald reacts with outrage and repudiated her because he cares only about his social reputation. When Nora discovers the truth about her husband, she declares her independence from him and leaves, slamming the door of the house behind her.

Alienation is a multifarious concept and a major theme in literature. Alienation is a "focal point from which to view human beings and hence to speak of the" (Bertell Ollman 133). Alienation is actually not a new concept, and Walter Kaufmann (lix) traced it back "to the beginning of recorded thought." However, alienation is one of the major problems confronting people. Because it is an important concept, Edgar Faure (49) believes that "the whole of literature, the whole of art must depict alienated life or cease to exist." This paper recasts some of the definitions of alienation and applies them to Nora in *A Doll's House*.

DISCUSSION

Nora lives her life for her husband and children, performing all the duties of a wife. She conforms completely to the norms of her society; she forgets about herself. She lives only to please her husband and take good care of her children. However, at this stage of the play, Nora is unaware of her situation; she does not realize that she is conforming to society, gaining its approval, but at the same time losing herself. Mortan A. Kaplan says that the individuals who “follow rules only to gain the approval of other people lack a sense of identity (167).” Erich Fromm emphasizes the same point saying an alienated person “does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts” (qtd. in Stephen Brookfield 103). Somewhere else Fromm argues that “automation conformity is the most subtle and intriguing and ultimately the most alienating” (qtd. in Brookfield 107). This conformity is so subtle that it has become internal, not external, so Nora conforms completely to her society unknowingly.

The proof is also found in Fromm’s argument where he explains that when one “adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns, [he] ceases to be himself ... man can realize his ‘self’ only if he abandons conformity to ‘cultural pattern’ and recovers his individuality (129).” This means that the more the individual conforms to society, the more he is alienated from himself, and when the individual is self-alienated, he becomes foreign or separated from himself, according to Kaplan (11). Kaplan adds that when the individual is self-alienated, he feels the absence of meaningful relationships in the life he lives (118).

One of the major causes of Nora’s alienation is that the patriarchal society she lives in, represented by her father and husband, deals with her as a child. This society does not respect her mind. It does not teach her to share in taking decisions. Even when she is a mother of three children, Nora acts as a child “listening at her husband’s door” (*A Doll’s House* 96). Even when Thorvald, her husband, discovers this, he does not reproach her; on the contrary, he pampers her saying, “Is that my lark twittering there? ... Is it the squirrel frisking around?” (*A Doll’s House* 97). It is clear that this patriarchal society prefers to keep Nora as a trophy in men’s hands thus leading her to self-alienation. Nora is not herself because she is a mother but behaves as a child.

Like children, Nora does not care about money. According to the patriarchal society, it is not her responsibility to care about money. All she cares about is that her needs have to be fulfilled, so she encourages Thorvald “we can borrow in the meantime” (*A Doll’s House* 97). Thorvald does not teach her to be responsible, so he says merrily, “Has my little spendthrift been making the money fly again?” (*A Doll’s House* 97).

Another children’s technique Nora follows when she needs something is nagging. She assures her friend, Mrs. Lind, that she will help her get a job saying that Thorvald “shan’t have any peace until he has hit upon something or other” (*A Doll’s House* 103). The worst thing, however, is that Thorvald is aware that he is dealing with Nora as a child; he does it on purpose. He knows that men want things to be this way when he tells Nora that her father “was never able

to deny you anything. And I haven't been able to, either. I am partly to blame" (*A Doll's House* 129).

Thorvald thinks that his wife is naïve because she plays Hide-and-0seek with her children. The truth, however, is that playing with the children is evidence that she is performing her duty towards her children well because, after all, it is healthy to play with one's own children, which helps break the barriers between children and their parents. It is not a point against Nora to play with her children. It is not to be seen as a point of immaturity. Instead, it is a proof that Nora is performing her duty very well.

Nora, actually, is not a naïve character; on the contrary, she is ready to help her husband. She even has the potential to be a leader in her society. Nora, for example, is ready to increase the income of her family by doing some copying. Her society, however, does not give her the opportunity to improve and develop her character; her society does not want her to be strong or responsible. Her husband tells her that copying "is not good for merry little larks" (*A Doll's House* 98).

Because Nora is seen as a child by her husband and father, she is not supposed to be involved in the serious matters of life. This way, she is sure to be a child as long as she lives. In her patriarchal society, "a wife can't borrow without her husband's consent" (*A Doll's House* 165). Before telling her about his cares, Thorvald decides that she cannot help him because he actually does not respect her mind and does not appreciate her abilities. To reach solidarity in a relationship, according to T. J. Scheff, both parties should be "committed to the proposition that the other party is human like self" (244). Thorvald is unable to see what his wife is capable of doing; he believes that she is inferior to him when it comes to taking decisions in serious matters.

Nora tries to break the bonds of her society, but she cannot. At a stage, she tells Thorvald that she "is not so silly as you all think" (*A Doll's House* 101). By this, she alludes to the loan she takes from the bank. To her, this loan is a proof of being responsible and wise. She even considers it "something to be proud and glad of" (*A Doll's House* 104). It is actually a cause of pride because by that loan she saves her husband's life. Without the loan, he might have died. Nora forges her father's signature not because she is irresponsible; on the contrary, she does it because she is responsible.

My father was ill. Had I asked him for his signature, I should have had to tell him why I wanted he money; but he was so ill I really could not tell him that my husband's life was in danger. It was impossible. (*A Doll's House* 120)

This shows the seriousness of Nora's position. She has to save her husband's life, she cannot tell her father, and she has to get the money. Nora is also responsible for paying off the loan she has taken to save her husband's life. Thorvald, however, does not know that she "always bought the simple things" (*A Doll's House* 107) to save some money. She thinks if she

is discovered, she will be excused because her motive is good. She does not know that “law takes no account of motives” (*A Doll’s House* 121). Later, however, she decides “that law is unjust ... It is easy enough to see that it was made by men” (*A Doll’s House* 140). She does not understand that the laws are “framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view” (William Archer 91).

Only at the end of the play, does Nora realize that she is alienated from her husband. The alienation that prevails between partners is known as interpersonal alienation. Husband and wife are partners in marriage, so when they are alienated from each other, they are said to be interpersonally alienated. Nora’s causes of interpersonal alienation are multifarious, some of which are familial, social and marital as well as personal. R. Felix Geyer explains that an interpersonal interaction has an input side and an output side. He adds that on the input side, unalienated interpersonal interaction means receiving “the other’s message as it is intended, and whatever it may consist of,” (127) and on the output side, it means reacting to the other’s message spontaneously (127). Moreover, he continues to say that the reaction should be immediate, which means the action or reaction should not be planned or determined by “lessons from the individual’s own past” (127). More importantly, partners do not need to interpret each other’s messages as they can express themselves frankly and freely, according to Geyer (127). Because they are partners, they should be involved together in all the matters (Geyer 128). Like involvement, participation “is the antithesis of interpersonal alienation since it gives a person the opportunity to participate in, understand and master his own destiny” (Geyer 179). Through the account above, one may conclude that a partner should be simple, direct and frank when dealing with his partner.

Applying the above mentioned causes of interpersonal alienation, one can easily see that Nora is alienated from her husband. A major factor that leads to Nora’s alienation from her husband is hiding secrets. Hiding secrets ruins her family life in the end. Mrs. Lind understands how dangerous it is to hide secrets when she decides that “This unhappy secret will undermine their marriage if it is allowed to remain. There has to be perfect frankness” (*A Doll’s House* 156). Nora hides secrets it all the time, but it is actually not her fault. If she tells her husband, he will not agree with her, so she starts doing things without his consent. What is worse, is that she even involves her children in hiding secrets telling them, “don’t tell papa that anyone has been here” (*A Doll’s House* 122). Later on, she involves Mrs. Lind in hiding secrets from her husband when she tells her, “don’t tell my husband that [Krogstad] was here” (*A Doll’s House* 145).

Most of the time, hiding secrets leads to lying. Alarmingly, Nora lies to Thorvald to keep her secrets. Even when he discovers her lies, Thorvald talks to her in a mild way saying, “My little bird must never do that again” (*A Doll’s House* 122). He does not take the matter seriously. They do not sit together to discuss things frankly to reach a conclusion. He even emphasizes on ending the discussion quickly saying, “it was the first time; let’s say no more about it” (*A Doll’s House* 122).

Thorvald himself is aware of the danger of lying. He says, “I have found that nearly all cases of early corruption may be traced to lying mothers” (*A Doll’s House* 124). Discovering that his wife sometimes lies to him, Thorvald should encourage her to be frank with him, should encourage her not to hide secrets. By not doing so, Thorvald indirectly encourages her to hide secrets, which requires her to lie sometimes to keep these secrets; consequently, the state of lack of communication prevails. So, in a way or another, Thorvald is responsible for Nora’s lies. She accuses him, “it is your fault that I have got into the habit of lying,” (*A Doll’s House* 166) and Thorvald does not object to this. Nora is alarmed when Thorvald talks about Krogstad’s forgery and its consequences because she has committed the same crime, but she dares not talk about it to her husband. She needs him to be her confidant, but he is not there for her.

Thorvald also hides secrets. He has been hiding a secret for eight years, and he even admits that he has “never cared to tell [her] before” (*A Doll’s House* 130) that he has doubts about the money her father gives her because the twelve hundred dollars “never entered in his accounts; it is quite impossible to find out where he got them from” (*A Doll’s House* 130). Hiding secrets and lying mean that there is planning; things are not happening spontaneously. Planning, according to Geyer, leads to interpersonal alienation (128). Interpersonal interactions, however, do not require planning; they require involvement. Both the husband and wife should be involved in all the matters in their mutual life. They should reach the level of living in each other’s mind, to reach oneness, in order not to be interpersonally alienated.

Melvin Seeman (784) explains that interpersonal alienation manifests itself as “powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement.” Seeman, then, explains what he means by every aspect of alienation. He says that powerlessness means that the partner has no power of decision, meaninglessness means that the person does not know what view to hold, normlessness means that the individual rejects socially accepted norms of conduct, isolation means that the person feels himself to be a stranger in his own society and self-estrangement means doing things against one’s will and principles (784-9).

Unfortunately, Nora undergoes all these aspects of interpersonal alienation. She is powerless because she cannot take decisions, and when she does by taking the loan she is to blame. This powerlessness actually means that she is not free to choose, and this absence of freedom may lead to the destruction of the individual (Keneth A. Schmidt 7). Her life with her husband is meaningless especially because they have two opposing points of view about the loan; Nora considers it something to be proud of while Thorvald views it as an act of irresponsibility. She does not stick to the norms of society when she acts beyond what she is allowed to do; her patriarchal society represented by her husband does not want her to be strong and independent enough to get a loan. When she discovers that what she does is not seen as a heroic deed but as an irresponsible one, Nora feels herself to be isolated from her husband. Finally, if she accepts her husband’s view of her deed and rejects hers, she will be self-estranged.

George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel defines alienation as objectification where a woman is seen as an object that can be possessed or dispossessed (qtd. in Faure 53). In the masculine society, the woman is there merely to please men. Thorvald says it to Nora directly, “I must have you about me, well and fresh and lively, to make me feel happy and comfortable” (*A Doll’s House* 128). No matter what she suffers, she has to please Thorvald. He does not care about her feelings; he only cares about his; pure selfishness. He is not even ashamed to tell her, “a cheerful face, to give me light and warmth. Isn’t that what you’re for?” (*A Doll’s House* 131). He also believes that she “must be happy and joyous ... Is not that what you were born for?” (*A Doll’s House* 149). Not only Thorvald, but also Krogstad decides that “The wife must suffer for the husband’s fault” (*A Doll’s House* 141). So, in this patriarchal society, women have to suffer whether it is their fault or their husbands’.

Nora has been aware of this her whole life, but she is unaware of the harm such a state may cause her. She accepts being a doll emphasizing, “I thought it was amusing to be played with by you” (*A Doll’s House* 166). The patriarchal society has the ability to convince women that their role in life is to be mere objects or trophies in men’s hands. More importantly, this society makes women believe they are happy to be played with; automation conformity as mentioned previously.

Even when everything is said directly at the end of the play, still Thorvald deals with Nora as an object. Thorvald believes that she has “become his property in a double sense” (*A Doll’s House* 164). He can only think of her as an object to own. He does not even ask her what she thinks of the matter because he does not respect her mind. He wants her to be dependent on him her whole life. He wants her to be his “bewildred, helpless darling.” (*A Doll’s House* 164). One can go far and say that Nora is actually dehumanized.

Because they lack communication, Nora does not understand that Thorvald’s responsibility towards duty is stronger than his responsibility towards her. He cannot break the rules of his patriarchal society, and why should he? All the rules in his society work for his benefit. She does not know that “There are two kinds of spiritual law, two kinds of conscience, one is man and another, altogether different, is woman” (Archer 91). Dr. Hank tries to make Nora understand that Thorvald is actually “a slave to duty, a bit of a drudge, a bit of a pedant,” (*A Doll’s House* 110) but she refuses to discuss this with Thorvald. She is afraid of facing reality, and she prefers to be disillusioned.

Another example that shows that Nora is actually interpersonally alienated from her husband is that she thinks he will pay what she owes Krogstad. Moreover, she “believed that [he] would come forward, take everything upon [himself], and say ‘I am the guilty one’” (*A Doll’s House* 171). She adds, “I so firmly believed that you would ruin yourself to save me” (*A Doll’s House* 171). The gap between them is so huge that Thorvald would have never thought of such a sacrifice. She sees him as a knight, but he proves to be a slave to his society. Thorvald

also does not understand Nora. They are waiting for a turning point in Thorvald's career, after which they will be financially secure. Nora should be happy, but she always looks worried. Nora is actually worried because of her trouble with Krogstad, but Thorvald thinks "She seems to be constantly tormented by the idea that it will not last" (*A Doll's House* 132). The problem, however, is not with having misunderstandings; the real problem is that they do not sit together to discuss it openly. Instead of discussing the problem with his wife, Thorvald leaves it to his friend Hank to do so.

At the end of her life with Thorvald, Nora realizes that she is there only to please her father and her husband. She realizes that she does things against her own will to please her father when she learns French and writes verses. She even adopts her father's opinions without caring about her own thoughts. The same thing happens with her when she marries; she does things against her own will to please her husband. She decides that she has been a doll in her father's and husband's hands. Only at the end of their life together, does Nora discover that "During eight whole years ... we have never exchanged one serious word about serious things" (*A Doll's House* 165).

When he discovers her secret, Thorvald does not think of her dilemma. To her disappointment, his first reaction is shouting at her, "Wretched woman; what have you done?" (*A Doll's House* 160). It is his first time to call her "woman". It is a brief moment of illumination that enables Nora to discover the truth about her husband. She does the forgery in the first place to save his life, and she hides it for eight years because she does not want him to suffer. When he discovers it, however, Thorvald is unable to see her sacrifice. Nora is shocked with disappointment that she is unable to speak.

Thorvald, on the other hand, goes on shouting and blaming Nora for her deed saying,

Oh! What an awful awakening! During all these eight years – she who was my pride and my joy – a hypocrite, a liar – worse, worse – a criminal – oh, the unfathomable hideousness of it – ugh, ugh ... No religion, no morality, not sense of duty.
(*A Doll's House* 161)

It is actually an awakening, but it is an awakening for Nora to discover how selfish Thorvald is. Even at this stage of his life with her, he does not care to understand why she does it. He only cares about his own business and feelings.

To save Thorvald from the scandal, Nora decides to commit suicide, but Thorvald does not believe her when she alludes to it, and sarcastically says, "no fine phrases. Your father, too, was always ready with them" (*A Doll's House* 161). More importantly, Thorvald decides to continue his life with Nora only because he cares about what people may say if the matter becomes known. He tells her, "There must be no outward change in our way of life" (*A Doll's*

House 162). He also shocks her when he puts an end to his love towards her calling it “a thing of the past” (*A Doll’s House* 162).

When Nora is saved, however, after Krogstad sends back her promissory note, Thorvald is able to see the truth, and he decides, “I know that what you did was all for love of me” (*A Doll’s House* 163). He thinks that Nora cannot believe that he forgives her, but it is actually he who should ask for forgiveness. Nora has awakened, and she decides to live for herself. Thorvald is unaware of the harm that he causes to Nora through her disappointment with him. He goes on thinking in his patriarchal way by telling her, “I can have you for myself alone” (*A Doll’s House* 163). He does not understand that she refuses to be his; she wants to be herself. Thorvald keeps talking about his forgiveness to her, but Nora only thinks of her new life.

That brief moment of disappointment serves Nora as a moment of illumination. She comes out of it brave enough to decide, “You don’t understand me; and I have never understood you – till to-night” (*A Doll’s House* 164). She even becomes strong enough to order him, “No, don’t interrupt. Only listen to what I say” (*A Doll’s House* 164-5). After a long discussion with Thorvald, Nora puts an end to her life with him saying, “it burst upon me that I had been living here with a strange man; and with a strange man I cannot continue to live” (*A Doll’s House* 172). Nora speaks no more than the truth when she addresses Thorvald telling him, “You forfeited [my love] when I saw you were not the man I had imagined” (*A Doll’s House* 170). She has lived with him eight years without knowing the truth about him; without knowing that he cares about social appearances more than he cares about his own wife.

To be herself and realize her potential, Nora has to leave Thorvald. She has to be free of all the pressures the patriarchal society practices on her. To be herself, Nora understands she has to be socially alienated. According to society, her holiest duties are her “duties to [her] husband and [her] children” (*A Doll’s House* 168). Nora, however, believes that her holiest duties are her duties towards herself. Being socially alienated means that the person feels he is separated from his own society because he cannot satisfy it. S. Kierkegaard’s comment on social alienation can be adopted to prove that Nora has to choose between being self or socially alienated. Kierkegaard says that an alienated person “finds it too venturesome a thing to be himself, far easier and safer to be like the others (Schaff 192). This is not a simple clash between duties; on the contrary, it represents the border between being self or socially alienated. According to society, “Before all else [she is] a wife and mother,” (*A Doll’s House* 168) which means that she has to sacrifice herself for her children and husband and be self-alienated. Nora decides not to be self-alienated, and she chooses to be herself because she believes “that before all else [she is] a human being” (*A Doll’s House* 168) although this means being socially alienated.

It becomes crystal clear for Nora that she has to either please herself or society. She cannot please both. She tells Thorvald, “I must make up my mind which is right – society or I” (*A Doll’s House* 169). She cannot accept being guilty for trying “to spare her dying father, or to

save her husband's life" (*A Doll's House* 169). Thorvald sees clearly that Nora does not "understand the society in which [she] lives" (*A Doll's House* 169). This is the incident that shows Nora how she will severely be punished if she does anything against the principles of her society.

Nora is well aware that she stands at an intersection where she has to choose between being herself as a human being or being a trophy in her husband's hands. Unfortunately, the masculine society offers her no other choice. Nora is lucky to be strong enough to start a new life where she expects to be herself and realize her potential. She is strong enough to deal with the prejudices of her masculine society. Ibsen shows that the masculine society works against her. When she is with her husbands, she experiences interpersonal alienation. When she is aware of her plight, she can continue her life with her husband and experience self-alienation or choose to be herself and realize her potential although this implies being socially ostracized.

CONCLUSION

In a patriarchal society, the man has the upper hand within the institution of marriage, so usually the interpersonal alienation affects the wife more deeply. No matter what definition one adopts or recasts on women, it becomes crystal clear that the wife is the partner who receives most of the harm. The husband, on the other hand, accepts the norms and rules of his patriarchal society because these norms and rules are put by men themselves for the benefit of men. By abiding to the norms of society, the husband is not self-alienated, and at the same time he is not socially alienated because these rules are basically put so that men can realize their potential and be themselves. If the wife, on the other hand, sticks to her husband's needs and desires, she becomes self-alienated because her husband's and her society's desires and needs are different from hers. If she tries to be herself, she becomes socially alienated, which Nora chooses to be at the end of *A Doll's House*.

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