

An Evaluation of the Character of Nora Through the Major Concepts of the Prominent Transcendentalists

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Abstract: Nora is the protagonist of *A Doll's House*, an outstanding creation of Henrik Ibsen. *A Doll's House* is a widely read drama which is very significant to introducing and understanding modern era and it is encoded by many critics in various ways till date. The character of Nora might be used to exemplify some of the major arguments of Transcendentalism. Ralph Waldo Emerson is the pioneer of the transcendental philosophy where Henry David Thoreau is a principal partisan of him. "Self-Reliance" and "Civil Disobedience" are two famous essays of Emerson and Thoreau consecutively where they express their transcendental views. The major arguments of these both writings are found in the character of Nora practically. The aim of this paper is to show the major concepts of "Self-Reliance" and "Civil Disobedience" in the character of Nora and thus to reveal a new point of view to read, understand and analyze the character significantly.

Keywords: Nora, Transcendentalism, Prominent Transcendentalists, Major Concepts

In *A Doll's House*, the central character Nora is presented by Ibsen as a pretty, lovely, caring and devoted wife of Helmer who tries to maintain her family life at her best but at last gives up all her endeavors feeling that all are in vain. Though many critics evaluate her as a doll of her husband but she can be considered as totally self-reliant as from the very beginning she is observed to maintain her own choice. She is totally free in selecting her household essentials, in decorating the house, in selecting gift items for anyone etc. Though outwardly she shows respect on Helmer's command but it is her choice to eat macaroons out of his sight. As described in *A Doll's House*: "[Hides the bag of macaroons in her pocket and wipes her mouth.] Come here, Torvald, and see what I've been buying." (Ibsen, 2013, p. 24). It is also her own confidence which allows her to take a loan instead of her husband's ever alarming that "No debts! No borrowing!" (Ibsen, 2013, p. 25).

Torvald dislikes borrowing as he is afraid of repaying the money on any sudden accident. So, he always follows the principle that "cut your coat, according to your cloth." But his wife is far different from him who has enough confidence to repay the money by her own effort. This is a sign of self-trust. She knows that her husband is very serious about taking any loan and he will prefer even death than borrowing and so she takes the loan secretly as she was confident enough that she will manage it later by hook or by crook. Though it was out of love for her husband but this obviously proves her self-confidence which is very similar to the idea of transcendental philosophy. As Emerson (1994) says, "A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace" (p. 1046). He uses the word 'man' to refer mere individual; to demonstrate 'human being' here argues on self-trust and to lead life accordingly. The character of Nora might be the best example of this kind of self-reliance, where she thinks that it is her duty to her spouse to save his life at any cost even there is no fault in telling false with him or in taking

loan by forgery in this regard. To her, everything is fair in love. This is very similar to Emerson's (1994) idea that "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind" (p. 1047).

To give a review on "Self-Reliance" Wilson (2000) states that a man must have self-confidence to remain receptive to the intuitive process. In "Self-Reliance", Emerson (1994) told the necessity of thinking for each man for himself, to trust in his own capability to understand, evaluate, and act. These features are found in the character of Nora. In taking loan secretly, she gives priority to her own thinking and beliefs because her husband is always against any kind of borrowing. But Nora prefers her own way to manage money for saving Torvald's life. She makes herself responsible in doing so and she acts accordingly by returning money to Krogstad beyond the knowledge of her husband.

According to Vaidyanathan (2004), when Mrs. Linde argues herself as more experienced and responsible than Nora, Nora shares her secret to Mrs. Linde. Then she inquires to Nora if she got the money from lottery but Nora scolds the idea of lottery boldly by telling that a lottery is not a credit to her. This rejection of the idea of lottery also expresses her self-respect and trust which is very much connected with the concepts of Emerson.

Nora is presented by Ibsen as a devotee not only to her husband, friends and family but also towards God as she is very much concerned in celebrating Christmas. She is found several times with Christmas tree in solitude in the drama which can be regarded as an intuition process with God. According to the description of Ibsen, whenever she goes through psychological torment, she gets closer to the tree. As Ibsen (2013) describes that after being threatened by Krogstad, she doesn't get any peace by playing with children or in sewing her gown, but orders Ellen to bring the Christmas tree and to set it in the middle of the room. Here also, her character has an attachment with transcendental idea as Wilson (2000) notes that the Transcendentalists emphasized on the direct relationship with God and with nature. In this regard, Christmas tree might be the best example of the connection with God through nature. Because, Christmas tree is a symbol of both nature and Christianity.

Being threatened by Krogstad, Nora was waiting for a miracle from her personal intuition which would save her from Krogstad and she expected it from Torvald's side but that miracle did not occur because Torvald was not a self-reliant person like her. Instead, when she took a loan by forgery that was a miracle indeed which she did from her personal intuition and that step saved Torvald's life. As Emerson (1994) says, for a divine exhibition, a divine man is required.

According to Tilak & Gupta (1996), "A self-reliant man is self-sufficient, the over-soul is his only guide and mentor" (p. 278). So, Nora's personal intuition tells her to take loan secretly and she does so by her own effort thinking that she will be able to manage it. Though she is thought by others, especially by Torvald, a criminal as she takes the loan by forgery but Emerson (1994) argues that good and bad depend on anyone's personal constitution, if anyone follows it that is good and ignores it that is bad. So, the act of Nora cannot be considered as bad as she did so following her personal constitution. According to Emerson (1994), self-reliant man will live in the society but he will not act according to his own constitution without doing any clash with it. So does Nora; she maintains her conjugal and family life happily, deals her friends and society merrily but plays a self-dependent role secretly, though outwardly she is a doll-wife to Torvald and an immature woman to Mrs. Linde and thus is misunderstood by all as to fulfill the idea of Emerson, because he suggests, "To be great is to be misunderstood" (Emerson, 1994, p. 1050).

He adds that self-reliant people are isolated spiritually which is shown by Ibsen in describing her mental agonies though outwardly she is crowded by all her family and friends. And at last, she finds her own way by deciding leaving them all which can be recognized as her spiritual elevation. And so, when she takes the decision to leave the family, it seems that she utters the speech of Emerson (1994) where he says, "I appeal from your customs. I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you, or you" (p. 1056). When Nora tells her decision to Torvald, perhaps the utterance of Emerson (1994) more suits as he speaks, "If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own. I do this not selfishly, but humbly and truly" (p. 1056).

Nora decides to leave Torvald neither to give him punishment, nor to show him her better future but she leaves him to protect her personal values which are misunderstood by Torvald. Here, she acts according to Emerson's final argument. Because, Emerson (1994) argues that the victory of man's own idea and principles only can give him peace.

Again, from the concept of social science, family is the smallest component of society or state. So, the reflection of the relationship between the ruler or government and its subject is seen in family life where the earning member plays the role of the government and other members have to act as his/her subjects. Usually, the husband is the earning member of maximum family where he acts like government and his wife and children follow his command. In case of Torvald's family also the same picture is drawn by Ibsen where from the very beginning of the play Nora follows Torvald's command just like a good citizen. But when Torvald fails to fulfil Nora's psychological expectation, her disobedience to him can be mentioned similar to the idea of "Civil Disobedience" by Thoreau. As Henry David Thoreau (2003) tells, "I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward" (p. 839). He adds that the people of the state serve for it just like machines. This same condition is seen in case of Nora where she serves for her husband just like a doll which can be considered the mechanism of a machine. And for this mechanical existence she is regarded by her husband as good wife or citizen. Thoreau (2003) argues, if government is proved as inefficient or unendurable, then its citizens have the right of revolution because self-reliant men are not machine. But this revolution should be in order. Nora serves for her husband as a doll from the very beginning of the play in the hope of a blessed conjugal life but as a self-reliant person when she feels that Torvald is inefficient to provide her spiritual support and he misunderstands and underestimates her values and thus becomes unendurable to her, she rejects to obey him in a civil way as if she follows the guidance of Thoreau (2003) where he says, "I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine" (p. 843). By leaving the family, Nora breaks the law of her contemporary society and takes a different track which is thought by her as right and rejects the doll's life which she condemns then. As if, she accepts the ideas of Thoreau (2003), "You must live within yourself, and depend upon yourself always tucked up and ready for a start, and not have many affairs" (p. 846).

To give a critical comment about the play, King (1989) says that *A Doll's House* shows that if the personal development is hampered by authority, then the moral and psychological necessity of using free will is required in some cases.

Phillips (2006) gives an overall review on Transcendentalism by saying that Emerson emerged the philosophy of Transcendentalism and Thoreau turned that philosophy into a practical theory of living. But after all these arguments, the character of Nora can be considered as the perfect combination of both of these prominent Transcendentalists. Because, she bears the philosophy of these great philosophers and acts accordingly as if she is a perfect disciple of them.

The character of Nora has been discussed by many critics from various points of view especially from feminist aspects. But when Ibsen was asked if his intention is to argue on women right, he refers human right instead of women right. From different plays by Ibsen, it can be said that he was a spokesman of Individualism and a supporter of self-consideration. Though Nora is a female in gender but after all she is a human being. Ibsen draws a perfect picture of her psychological and physical deeds. Though her character is criticized differently but her existence as a liberal individual cannot be ignored. The last scene of the play describes how self-sufficient she is and also, she has self-respect and self-awareness in protecting her personal values. The rejection of her family might be regarded as feminist plight by the male society but from transcendental viewpoint it might be the best way to express her self-reliance through civil-disobedience.

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