

Craving for Individual Female Identity: A Comparative Study on Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*

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Abstract

*The craving for self is innate in every human being. It is also true from a feminist perspective. The subordinate role of women and the conformity to the expectation of society compels them to conceal their real self. As the self has long been a salient topic in feminist philosophy, it is pivotal to question personal identity. For a long time, women's selfhood or self-identity has been systematically subordinated, diminished, and belittled by giving men as "Subject" positions and women as "Other". This paper presents how women have been identified as mere reflections of men or as their opposite and characterized through the different perceptions of men as well as the subordination as a result of them. And for this study, two prominent feminist texts of literature have been chosen of which – one is Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and another is Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*. By comparing these two texts, it is attempted to exhibit how female "Other's" individual identity has been overshadowed by the presence of dominant male "Subject" and how their necessity of individual female identity led themselves to protest against the typical roles of patriarchy. Both of the authors try to portray the root causes of women's unspeakable misery for which women are looking forward to shaping their own personal identity.*

Keywords: Feminism, identity, selfhood, self-identity Subject, Other, patriarchy, protest, misery.

Introduction

The establishment of self-identity is intrinsic in every human being. It is a part of self-existence. Individual identity is a sort of evidence of the existence of human beings on earth. This statement is also appropriate from the perspective of feminism. Day by day women are becoming conscious about their rights. The more they are becoming conscious regarding their rights the more they desire to establish their own identity. In a patriarchal society, women are being subjugated and marginalized

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due to the dominance of the male. The inactivity and internalization of women from childhood to adulthood is also responsible for the miserable condition in a patriarchal society. It is an impediment in the path of empowerment of women. There are lots of feminists who inspired women to be conscious of their rights on this earth. As England has her Mary Wollstonecraft and France has her Simone de Beauvoir as feminists, Bengal also has her Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain, an intrepid feminist. Henrik Ibsen is another Norwegian 19th-century feminist writer who has given women a powerful and strong voice against the established rules and bindings of patriarchal society.

For the study of this article, two feminist texts have been chosen. One is Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and another is Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*. In both of these feminist texts, the authors try to show the reflection of the suppressed desire of women folk.

In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen paints the picture of a subordinate role held by women. Almost every female character is shown as a puppet in the hand of their male-dominated society. Especially, the protagonist Nora Helmer faces this situation severely. She was the "doll" in the hand of her father before her marriage to Torvald Helmer and after the marriage, the "doll" had been transferred from father to husband. Nora being economically advantaged in comparison to the play's other female characters could realize it at the end of the play. As Torvald was the dominant partner in marriage so it is impermissible for him to assume the assistance of his wife in the case of saving his life by taking the risk of a loan without his permission. And therefore, another male character of this play (Krogstad) used this opportunity as blackmail. Nora, finding her husband convinced through the blackmail of Krogstad, could understand the illusion of her previous self. After discovering her real self, she decided to step out of her patriarchal society's boundaries by leaving her husband and children. And thus slamming of a door behind she would like to make her own way in this world. Through this bold attempt of Nora Helmer, the craving or desire for independent self/identity is reflected.

In *Sultana's Dream* through the depiction of 'Dream land' or 'Lady land' ruled by women a reversal state of patriarchal society is presented. By representing the fictitious 'utopia' of female, Begum Rokeya would like to present the inner desire of women out of their long time oppressed state. She (Rokeya) portrays the dream sequences of the protagonist, Sultana in this text through which she shows a world without patriarchal oppression, gender discrimination and gender binaries. On the basis of the reversed gender structure, she exhibits paradoxical view of men and women. In this 'Lady land', women are in ruling position while men are shown in 'Purdah' and confined to 'Mardana'. The innovative scientific

invention and its accurate application by the females show their power and creativity. By being defeated in a war with the ladies of the 'Lady land', men are supposed to remain within the four walls of the home and maintain 'Purdah'. It is actually the future state dreamt by Begum Rokeya herself who brought up in the restricted Muslim patriarchal society. She would like to break the circle of 'male domination' and tries to throw a response against the patriarchal society through this text. Thus, she also depicts the inner desire of a female's own self/identity.

The Objective of the Research

The main objective of the research is to find out the root causes of women's unspeakable misery in the patriarchal society and the solution to the problem of disparity between men and women. It has also the aim of establishing a gender-balanced harmonious society.

Research Methodology

To pursue the study, several methodologies have been followed in this research. As it is qualitative research, an in-depth observation and analysis is made to test the hypothesis and the hypothesis-generating outcomes. The original texts of *A Doll's House* and *Sultana's Dream* are used as the primary source of this research. And several essays, articles, thesis and online publications are used as secondary sources. A little bit of discussion and analysis on 'feminist criticism' is also presented in this research.

Literature Review

Several research findings and articles were studied to pursue and develop the study of this paper. But among those works, very few are related to the topic, "Craving for Individual Female Identity: A Comparative Study on Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*". There are the following articles in which individual perspective on the basis of feminism and other related issues of gender and society is given:

Sapna stated in her article, "Transcending The Gender Stereotypes in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* and Taslima Nasrin's *My Girlhood Days*" (August, 2017) that Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's short story, *Sultana's Dream* and Taslima Nasrin's autobiography *My Girlhood days* shows the transcending gender stereotypes in addition to create a foundation of a new-fangled consciousness, both political and divine and uniformly. The two writers use writing as a means of resistance by transgressing the gender stereotypes in their presentation.

In another article "A Feminist Analysis of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*" (June 2016), Saman Salah Hassan Balaky & Nafser Abdul Mosawir Sulaiman (scholars of Salahaddin University, Iraq) show how Henrik Ibsen challenged the stereotypical representation of women in

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literature with his female characters, specially Nora. They also explore how and to what degree Henrik Ibsen is involved with the women's cause by referring to some of his speeches, letters and acquaintances.

Chakrabarty in her article, "A Contemplation on 'Sultana's Dream'" (India, 2014) exhibits her contemplation as to how Begum Rokeya Shekhawat could manage to be so radical in her thoughts to challenge the patriarchal culture itself through the story of reversal state of women even in such an arena of 'male-dominated' society. Here, the condition of Muslim women in contemporary India is also presented through this article.

Another article, "Nora in *A Doll's House*: A Portrayal of Emancipation and Empowerment: A Feminist Perspective" (July-December 2013) by Awal presents the motivational parameter which helps individual female character such as Nora to be self-motivated rather than to be restricted and dominated under the system of patriarchy. This paper also shows how the final action of Nora determines her own emancipation and empowerment as an equal being in the world.

The next article, "Ibsen's Treatment of Women" (Feb 26, 2016) by Hossain focuses on Henrik Ibsen's treatment of women in the light of subjugation, marginalization, subordination, psychological trauma, dilemma, suppression and oppression of the women during 19th-century Scandinavian bourgeois society. It also attempts to look at the categorization of Ibsen's women, the role of motherhood and critical evaluation of his female characters.

Hasanat in her article, "Sultana's Utopian Awakening: An Ecocritical Reading of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*" attempts to show how Begum Rokeya in *Sultana's Dream* invites women of her society to have an illusory experience of freedom that exists outside *purdah* and the concept of restriction as a master tool is set in reverse in such a provocative manner that the apparently simple writing of a "veiled" Muslim woman unveils a path of discourse that challenges the very foundation of Muslim patriarchal systemization.

Elahi in her conference paper titled "Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Her Vision of Women's Liberation in *Sultana's Dream*" (24th & 25th March, 2017) tries to find out the root causes behind women's unspeakable misery and to show contemporary women's looking forwardness to shaping their own lives, households, communities, and nations despite the restrictive gender ideologies and practices. It also explores the world of women in South Asia, especially in Bangladesh, in light of Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*.

Ghafourinia and Jamili in their paper, "The Women's Rights in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*" (2014) investigates the role of women and their

right in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Ibsen's protest against the position of women in a masculine society which is unfair and under the hegemony of male-dominated powers.

In the paper of Miah, "A Feminist Critical Evaluation of How Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Language of Protest Deplored Patriarchy and Social Anachronism in the British Bengal" (30th October 2014), Rokeya's vocal voice of protest against various social anomalies, social backwardness, misinterpretation of Islam to cling to patriarchal tradition is found. The author tries to show how the language of protest deplored patriarchy and social anachronism in British Bengal.

After studying all of the researches and articles by various scholars, it is found that almost all of them have tried to give focus on the unspeakable misery of women in patriarchal society, the root causes of those miseries, language of protest against those sorts of social anomalies and emphasis on the emancipation and empowerment of women. But a little study is found on the "craving or desire of women for their individual female identity". Some of them have tried to mention the unspeakable voice of women but almost none of them clarified the inner dream of women to be independent and to form a self-identity which is reflected through both of the feminist texts, *A Doll's House* and *Sultana's Dream*. As the author deals with the individual text from the aforementioned feminist texts or combines those texts with other individual texts so almost no comparative study and analysis between the two texts is found also. That's why, the topic of this paper, "Craving for Individual Female Identity: A Comparative Study on Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*" is chosen for the present study. By analyzing the characters, events, or incidents of the two texts, it is shown through this paper that how these two feminist texts reflected women's latent desire for individual identity.

Feminist Criticism

In his book, *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir says 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman'. This statement is also true on the basis of the two feminist texts of this study, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain composed *Sultana's Dream* in English and published it in *Indian Ladies Magazine* in 1905. The text records her attitude toward Muslim patriarchy and was influenced by her beliefs that Indian men and women were, as Ray notes in her *Early Feminists of Colonial India*, "willing collaborators in their own oppressions" (61). Begum Rokeya is an intrepid feminist author, a prominent educationist, a dedicated women's rights activist in British Bengal during the late 19th and early 20th century who pioneered women's advancement and led them to the way of enlightenment and

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empowerment breaking all the traditional social barriers. Henrik Ibsen is another notable Norwegian playwright who wrote *A Doll's House* in 1879 which was published in a period of revolution in Europe. Though Ibsen didn't expose himself directly as a feminist but through his treatment of women in various texts specially, *A Doll's House*, it is proved that he was concerned with women's cause. So, both of the authors from different countries have dealt with the concept of 'feminism' in most of the texts.

Chakrabarty states that feminism is not only a concept but also a way of life that stands for giving voice to the oppressed whose rights are violated or trivialized. There are several sects of feminism among which radical and liberal feminism are prominent. Radical feminism emphasizes the difference between men and women based on their needs and scope for development. On the other hand, liberal feminism focuses on women's ability to maintain their equality through their own actions and choices. Where radical feminists celebrate womanhood by negating women's biological limitations, liberal feminists believe in the less physical and intellectual capability of women than men. On the basis of this context, it can be said that in the aforementioned feminist texts: *A Doll's House* by Ibsen and *Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya, the elements of radical feminism are more visible.

Another feminist critic, Showalter identified three phases of modern women's literary development which are: the Feminine, the Feminist and the Female phase respectively. During the Feminine phase (1840-80), women writers largely imitated the dominant male writers and their assumptions about female nature; the distinguishing feature of this period is the introduction of the male pseudonym. In the Feminist phase (1880-1920), women used literature to present wronged womanhood, advocated for their rights and rejected male standards and expectations of femininity. In the Female phase (1920-present), women reject imitation as well as protest and instead deal with women's texts as an autonomous art (Rice and Waugh 2001: 153-4). As *A Doll's House* and *Sultana's Dream* were written and published during late 19th and early 20th century so these two texts cover the Feminist and Female phase of modern women's literary development.

Discussion

The prominent South Asian Muslim feminist author Begum Rokeya wrote her short story, *Sultana's Dream* after learning the English language and scientific concept from her elder brother. During that time formal education for women was restricted for the women of a conservative Muslim family. Living in such type of strict patriarchal society, Begum Rokeya dared to write such type of short story which

portraits the complete paradox of that society through a dream sequence of the protagonist of this short story, Sultana. Actually, it is the dream of Rokeya herself which she expressed through the short story.

The story opens with a dream sequence of a girl called Sultana who once noticed a woman in her room with whom she befriended and considered as Sister Sara, who had invited her to come out of her room (Chakrabarty, 35). She was led by the direction of Sister Sara from the darkness of her room to the brightness of morning outside where she encounters a typically opposite world than her own. To her utter surprise, she found that she had reached a land called 'Lady land' where women were not bound to *purdah* or living in *jenana*. Here, the women were busy in scientific works, politics and other outward affairs without any restrictions. Instead, all men were inside *mardana* and living within the four walls of the home. An elaborate discussion on wars where women had taken part and had won the same is presented through the story. Due to the political offense, the king of the neighboring country declared a war against the 'Lady land'. The men in the land stood up with arms to defend their country but the wise women in the 'lady land' decided to utilize their wit and wisdom and scientific knowledge instead of bloodshed. Consequently, they (women) won the battle. This story also presents the scientific concept of rainwater harvesting (Hossain 1988; 2005), an eco-restoration drive, a greenery movement that bears immense water management potential in areas of water crisis (Bhattacharya and Borah, 2014). Next, the role of dedicated and witty Queen of 'Lady land' is mentioned for her work of development for the country.

By this story, Begum Rokeya shows her inner desire to break all the barriers related to women. With the depiction of utopian Lady land, Begum Rokeya hits the long time cherished norms of patriarchy and internalization of women in a patriarchal society. She tries to bring out the social prejudices regarding women by showing that it was not Islam rather society's anarchic tradition that subjugated women under the domination of patriarchy. Thus, Rokeya 'sharply criticizes the Muslim system of secluding women in confined quarters and depriving them of the rights to education and physical and mental health' (Fayeza Hasanat, 116). She 'has made an attempt to unsheathe the enslaved women and get them dependent on their own with a view to taking a swipe at men for their oppression against women and emancipating them from the vicious circle of ignorance, indolence, and subjugation physically, psychologically, intellectually, socially, and economically' (Eliza Binte Elahi, 99). By representing the radical state for females and by using the harsh language of protest against patriarchal society, Rokeya would like to express the outburst of deprived women and their inner desire to establish an individual female identity. She tries to present the necessity

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of women's self-identity in society which can only be availed through educational and economical achievement.

The play, *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen is also written on the basis of the feminist concept. 'This play concentrated on the way that women were seen, particularly in the context of motherhood and marriage' (V. Nirmala Kumar & Dr. K.K. Sunalini, 835). Here, Ibsen deals with the self-revelation of Nora, the main character of this play. At the beginning of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora is a content housewife who fills the social roles accepted by Victorian women. She was a doll in the hand of his husband, Torvald Helmer. And this doll has been transferred from father to husband through marriage. As Henrik Ibsen made Nora say to her husband in *A Doll's House*: "Our house has been nothing but a playroom. Here I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I used to be papa's doll-child." (Ibsen, 2006, p. 164) Here, the lead character, Nora Helmer has committed forgery to save the life of her husband which becomes an issue of ego for her authoritarian husband. Having been brought up in this patriarchal society, Nora readily accepts her role as a wife. She relies on her husband even in simple circumstances such as choosing a costume for a party. Torvald tells Nora that as a man, he will take on responsibility in times of trouble, when "it really counts". However, when Torvald does find out about the loan, not only does he not take on responsibility, but he also distances himself from Nora and claims that there is no one who "gives up honor" for love. This leads to Nora's realization and self-awareness regarding her present condition. When Krogstad threatens to blackmail her near the end of Act One, Nora discovers for the first time that her actions are illegal and will be "judged according to law". Yet Nora cannot believe him, believing, as she does, that her actions – as a wife saving her "husband's life" and as a daughter protecting her dying father from "anxiety" – are socially acceptable. Thus she learns for the first time that what she had believed as the right thing to do, fulfilling the society's roles of a daughter, wife, and mother, is in fact illegal. Torvald tells Nora that she is "poisoning" her very own children with "lies and pretense". From a content housewife who plays the defined roles society has given her, she now questions the very values of the society that she grew up in.

In the determination of *A Doll's House* when Nora left her home, children and husband, there was no implication that it was simply the answer for every wife in whom self-realization as an individual is being smothered by marriage; it is the course for Nora because of what she is, the thing that Helmer is, and all the individual conditions of their lives. Regardless of whether Nora's choice was correct or wrong, when her universe slammed about her, unaccustomed to decisions as she might have been, she stood up and utilized all the powers of independent feeling

and will she had; the decision was unavoidable one for her (V. Nirmala Kumar & Dr. K.K. Sunalini, 835-836). After discovering her real self, she decided to step out of her patriarchal society's boundaries by leaving her husband and children. And thus slamming of a door behind she would like to make her own way in this world. By this attempt of Nora, an inner desire to make an identity of her own is reflected.

Findings

After analyzing the two feminist texts, *A Doll's House* by Ibsen and *Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya, some common issues are found. It is explored from both of the texts that the root causes of the misery of women are- lack of proper knowledge about rights, lack of voice to protest against the patriarchal society, internalization of womanhood from early childhood, lack of belief in own self in decision making, dependency on men, lack of educational and economical competence etc. From the comparative study of these two texts it is proved that if women can go beyond all of the barriers of patriarchal society and overcome all of the lacking, they can get out of their subordinate condition in society. And by not being overshadowed and influenced by the men if they can establish their individual identity through education and other competence, their miserable condition will be removed.

Conclusion

Simone de Beauvoir's provocative declaration, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the other," signals the central importance of the self for feminism. Both of the texts of this study, *A Doll's House* by Ibsen and *Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya deals with the concept of feminism and an exploration of the inner heart of women. In *Sultana's Dream*, through portraying the reverse picture of patriarchy and by showing women in a dominant and powerful position, Begum Rokeya expresses the latent 'desire of women to build their individual identity' in society. Though she depicts the radical feminist environment in the short story by keeping men in women's condition she actually would like to focus the metaphor of the reality of women in the patriarchal society and also tries to give a hidden message of establishing women's individual identity. In Henrik Ibsen's feminist play *A Doll's House*, by showing the reaction of the protagonist Nora at the end of the play (when she transformed her from state of 'doll' to a human being of flesh blood), Ibsen hints at the desire of women to form a world of her own or to form an individual identity. If women can form their individual identity even in a patriarchal society, they won't be treated as merely 'doll' or 'weak object' and can get out of the subjugation of the domination of males.

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