Lona, Nora, and Petra: A Study in Henrik Ibsen’s New Women

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“The reshaping of social conditions now under way in Europe is concerned chiefly with the future position of the workingman and of woman. This is what I hope for and what I wait for. It is what I intend to work for and what I shall work for all my whole life so far as I am alive”.
– Ibsen’s Letters and Speeches-249

Abstract

The following discourse deals with Ibsen’s courageous treatment of the woman question of his era– second half of the nineteenth century in specific. All the three dramas: Pillars of Society, A Doll’s House, and An Enemy of the People, which the monograph explores, betray Ibsen’s ‘New Women’ conception. The playwright’s all three ‘New Women’ featured in these plays fight for their recognition in the patriarchal society not as women – daughters, sisters, sweethearts, wives, and mothers – but as individuals, and above all, as equally rational human beings. The treatise excavates into Ibsen’s explicit ‘New’- and ‘Old Woman’ conceptions. The dissertation strives to dig out the conflicts between woman’s aspirations and the society’s putting limits on them. As the author of the present discourse, I have endeavoured to examine Ibsen’s three spirited and uncompromising heroines: Lona, Nora, and Petra in the contexts of the contemporary feminist agitations and anti-feminist resistances in America and Europe, and judge them as standard-bearers of modern women. Drudges have also been made to categorise Ibsen as a keen and avid onlooker of a thoroughgoing revolt of the ‘New Women’ of his epoch against the social, cultural, and political orders prevailing especially in those days’ Norway and in other Scandinavian, and broadly speaking, in European countries.

“New Women” and “Old Women” - the two very contrasting phrases - are crucial in a twenty-first century understanding of Henrik Ibsen, one of the major Norwegian playwrights of the late nineteenth century. Ibsen was born in 1828; he died in 1906. Feminist Movement in America and Europe d awned before Ibsen was born, reached its height during his lifetime, and succeeded in reaping the harvest of franchise just before and following his death. Women in New Zealand achieved their voting rights in national elections in 1893, in Australia in 1902, in Finland in 1906, in Norway in 1913, in Soviet Russia in 1917, in Canada in 1918, in Great Britain in 1918 &1920; in Germany, Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1919; and, in the United States and Hungary in 1920. Ibsen directly and practically saw the feminist agitations in America, and the suffragist movements particularly in Britain, France, and his own country, Norway. He personally had the company of many militant suffragists, and shared their sentiments, pangs and views. He also apportioned the thoughts and ideas of many a feminist writer and theorist. With his own eyes, he noticed mass feminist upheaval: suffragist conferences and meetings, street demonstrations, window breakings, hunger strikes, and imprisonment of the era’s feminist leaders and activists. On the contrary, he also experienced strong anti-feminist resistances both in America and Europe. So, a mastermind like Ibsen was compelled to deal with it in his superb and classified literary writings.

As a literary type, the ‘New Woman’ (the phrase was first coined in 1980s) flourished toward the end of the nineteenth century. The phrase denotes women who were pushing against the limits, which the patriarchal society imposed on them. Ibsen is considered the creator of the ‘New Woman’. Through his ‘New Woman’, Ibsen introduced on the European stage what Webster’s Encyclopedia of Literature calls “a new order of moral analysis”
(p. 577). This ‘New Woman’ is one of the pivotal elements that defined what is termed as ‘Modern Drama’, or ‘Ibsenism’. To well apprehend Ibsen’s ‘New Woman’ conception as exhibited through his three heroines: Lona, Nora, and Petra, we may have a juxtaposition of the past’s ‘Old Woman’ conception with it.

Ibsen’s the ‘New Woman’ is not a pure, nice girl whose romance culminates in a highly successful marriage. She is not ready to put herself in a role of being an inspiration for her husband, brother or son; rather, she is an inspiration for herself. She is not a wife who suffers the infidelities of her husband, or who herself has committed adultery; nor is she primed to bemoan the unhappy love of her youth. She is wholly a new type of woman hitherto unknown. She has independent demands on life. She is a heroine who asserts her personality, and protests against the universal servitude of women in the family, in the society, and in the State. She fights for her rights as a representative of her sex. The ‘New Woman’ not only has no fear of independence, but she learns to appreciate it increasingly. Her interests go beyond the narrow circles of the home, and of love. She does not want an exclusive possession when she loves. She flees from all that which could bind her to the dictates of her own self. In case of adverse situations, she is discovered unbending, and even determined to live single. Singularity is thus one of her core characteristics. Single women are the ones who more and more determine this type. As a single woman, the ‘New Woman’ ceases to play a subordinate role. She is not the reflex of her man. She is a modern woman. She is distinguished by her rejection of strict division between conventional masculine and feminine identities. She disdains public opinions. Her emancipated status is reflected in her costume, appearance, language, and behaviour. Freedom is a crucial factor in the life of the ‘New Woman’. The ‘New Woman’ frequently dares to be herself, and is always ready to encounter how many skies may fall upon her.

Ibsen’s ‘New Woman’ is not a soft, sheepish, and womanly woman; rather, she is a dauntless and decision-making masculine woman who demands respect for the freedom of her feelings. To the woman of the new day, loss of her identity is the worst disaster. She cannot renounce her ego for the sake of the beloved, and for the protection of love’s happiness. She protests against love’s prison. She is not set or arranged to be the shadow of her husband. She cannot abandon her work, her profession, and her life-tasks. She is a questioning and dreaming woman. She is ready to encounter any life-risk. Her struggle is not that of right to love, but against all moral imprisonment. Before her, no longer stands the wife, before her, stands the personality, the woman as individual and as human being. This is the rebellion of the ‘New Woman’, who is both a type and an individual at the same time.

Yet another trait of this ‘New Woman’ is her high level of education. Her talent and elitism compel her to break the rusted fetters of her sex. Her sophistication does not allow her to endure the masculine despotism. Both in kind and in degree, she is ready to be transformed into the subject of her own independent tragedy, rather than an object of a tragedy of a second or a different male soul that claims to be her superior.

On the contrarily, the ‘Old Woman’ of the past was altogether ignorant of how to appreciate her own independence. The loss of her man, or the beloved, was her worst disaster. She was much dominated by her masculine figure. She had no economic independence. She was never an asset; rather, always a dependant, a liability. She constantly had to depend on marriage and sex for her bread and survival. She was a passive sexual object. She had no right over her income, even if there were any. She had no right to property, or over custody of her children. She had no right over decision making. She had no right to divorce. The home was her proper sphere. She had no separate identity; rather, her existence was merged into her husband’s through marriage. In a word, she possessed no autonomy. She looked as the patriarchal society wished her to look; she thought as the patriarchal society wanted her to think.

Furthermore, the male dominated patriarchal society considered the ‘Old Woman’ as an incomplete human. The ‘Old Woman’ not only suffered the pressure of the society, but also served men, and sought their approval at each step. She was marginalised by society because of her sex. Patriarchy well-socialised her into a serving creature. She was never the subject, rather always the object. The male was the ‘centre’ – the Self; the female was the ‘margin’ – the Other. She was always a sexual property of her male. The exact position of the ‘Old Woman’ gets best exhibited in Ibsen’s immediate later days in the hands of one of the greatest British male novelists, D. H. Lawrence. In his 4th novel, The Rainbow (1915), D. H. Lawrence portrays Lydia Lensky, the girl-wife of the Polish physician:

…she became his slave, he was her lord. She was…she was the slave, she kissed his feet, she had thought it an honour to touch his body, to unfasten his boots. For two years she had gone on as his slave, crouching at his feet, embracing his knees…she was there for him just to keep
him in condition … she was to him one of the baser or material conditions necessary for his welfare in persecuting his ideas (p. 238-39).

Such was the ‘Old Woman’, a negligible part of her husband who was the whole. Even, in the most recent past, the ‘Old Woman’ has become today’s the Spouse. Still, she is the mere shadow of her husband, only a supplement, an appendage, an attachment, and never a complete whole.

In contrariety, Ibsen pays a lot of attention when he depicts a female character – his modern woman. Thus, he is successful in his portrayal of women characters as ‘New Women’. His first modern woman appears in his drama, Pillars of Society (1877). This ‘New Woman’, Lona Hessel, has a mind of her own, and does not rely on the male protection. She often remains single, because she finds it difficult to merge her identity with that of the husband through marriage. She is at once a type and an individual. We discover that she has a singular inner world. This world is full of human interests. Lona is independent inwardly and self-reliant outwardly. She is not afraid even to scandalise the town by saying that she is going to America to join her stepsister Betty’s younger brother Johan. She cuts her hair short and wears men’s outfits. She slaps Bernick on the face when he announces his engagement with Betty. Her scandalous behaviours continue even abroad. There she sings in saloons for pay, gives public lectures, and publishes a quite outrageous book. Upon her return from America, she washes her face in the pump in the middle of the marketplace. She is initially taken for a member of the circus because she carries a bag over her shoulder by the handle of her umbrella, and waves at the gawking towns-people. She tries “to annoy the petticoated and trousered prudes that one met at every turn in the town” (p. 55). She has no concern of what other people may think of her behaviours and deeds which she herself considers rational.

Thus, Lona’s independent spirit and liberal thinking make her a typical ‘New Woman’. She is a dynamic heroine of Ibsen. In the drama, the dramatist makes her insist upon unveiling all social hypocrisy. She is modelled on Aasta Hansteen, the pioneering Norwegian feminist who most directly influenced heroine of Ibsen. In the drama, the dramatist makes her insist upon unveiling all social hypocrisy. She is a feminist. Her speeches denounced all traditional, theological, and social views about women, and called forth a storm of abuse. She was eccentric and practical enough to wear men’s boots when it rained, and often carried for symbolic purposes a whip to protect herself against the oppressor. She immigrated to America at the age of fifty-five, and spent nine years mostly in Boston, and in Chicago, herself eking out her own living. During Hansteen’s years in America, Norwegian feminism made great strides; the League came into being, along with Gina Krog’s “New Ground”, the first Norwegian feminist journal. From America, Hansteen ceaselessly wrote journal articles for Norwegian journals. Thus, she became a popular item on the Norwegian press. Ibsen could not but devour all about her from cover to cover. All the more, Ibsen’s interests in the contemporary era’s feminist upheaval, his association with feminism and his progressive thinking in line with America, as are evident in Pillars of Society, echo Hansteen’s widely expressed views that America was the natural home of women’s liberation. Likewise, Lona Hessel’s deliberate unfeminine behaviours and her outspoken criticism of woman’s lot echo Hansteen’s indomitable and irresistible voices and dreams.

Nevertheless, Lona is Ibsen’s ‘New Woman’ with a vengeance. Like real-life Hansteen, she is a liberated woman, a feminist. She values self-fulfilment and independence, rather than the stereotypically feminine ideal of self-sacrifice. She wants legal and sexual equality. She is well educated, reads a great deal, has a job, is athletic or otherwise physically vigorous and prefers comfortable, even male attire – to traditional female grubs. She is progressive in politics. She wants to flee like the sea wind. She does not at all like sewing white things; contrarily, she pulls open the curtains, opens the doors and the windows onto the garden, and thus destroys the proper atmosphere for ladies. To ‘Mr. Parson’, she says, she wants to let ‘fresh air’ come in. Thus, Lona – the ‘New Woman’ – becomes the victorious scourge of the society that traduced real women of the continent so long.

Next, in A Doll’s House (1879), Nora’s story is the chronicle of an immature woman who suddenly wakes up and sees her marital situation as a total life-lie. It is absolutely unsettling when Nora decides to abandon her husband and children. Torvald Helmer, Nora’s husband, accuses her of running out of her most sacred vows. Though the subject of divorce was hardly recognised in public culture in all Europe in Ibsen’s era, he makes his Nora feel: the home with the husband and children is not the only place for her; rather the home, the woman’s place, is a make-
believe world fit for dolls. Ibsen makes Nora a chivalric character who defies her gender role to pursue a different vision – a woman’s version of society. Nora determines to be much more than her husband’s little woman. She is not a creature of little intellectual and moral capacity. She feels she is a man, neither weak nor fragile. She develops in herself an anger of humiliation. She no more wants to be her husband’s lark, or doll, an obscure Norwegian housewife; rather, her words are resoundingly political. She believes, before all else she is a human being, an individual, just as a man is. So she bursts out: “Torvald, I can get on all the way without your help” (p. 122), “I do not mean to be despised any longer. I mean to go away” (p. 94). As she walks out, she becomes a self-directed being. Her action is a proclamation of herself as a ‘New Woman’. Nora’s movement challenges both husband and society – the patriarchy.

It is Nora who could raise money; it is Nora who could take her husband to a change, to a better weather abroad, to save his life. So it can convincingly be said that the intelligence and determination that capacitated her to save Torvald, would also well enable her to take on the world outside. Here lies the secret of Nora – the ‘New Woman’. Ibsen does not separate Nora – the mother, from Nora – the wife, because he is identifying the entire source of her oppression. He consistently refuses to make the children a separate issue; rather, he philosophises that in any case, wifehood precedes childbearing and motherhood. With Ibsen, limiting women to muddled domesticity and yet simultaneously holding them responsible for raising children is absurd.

So, Nora’s leave-taking and slamming the door of the doll’s house behind her to enter the night of the open world is the chivalric ideal of Ibsen’s ‘New Woman’. Upon finishing A Doll’s House, the dramatist wrote to his publisher: “I cannot recall any work of mine that gave me so much satisfaction during the working out of the details as this one has” (Letters, 180).

In An Enemy of the People (1882), Ibsen makes Petra Stockmann a full-time teacher. As a ‘New Woman’, Petra first appears on the stage with a pile of exercise books under her arms. We first see her as coming home after teaching night school, “delectably tired” (295). She expresses unalloyed liking for her work. Her high level of education is, again, one of the traits of the emancipated woman. Schoolteacher Petra is a free-thinking young woman. She earns her own living. As a ‘New Woman’, she is not a dependant. She is dauntless to speak out her mind.

As a ‘New Woman’, Ibsen’s Petra refuses to translate a story simply because it defends conventional Christian beliefs. She tells the editor, Hovstad, that the piece is “totally opposed to everything you stand for…It shows how a supernatural power…arranges everything for the best” (331 – 32). Petra is repelled by the hypocrisy of a school system which requires her to teach things she does not believe in. So, she declares she would prefer to start a new school herself if she had the means. Her dream comes true when her father announces his plan to found an institution in which his daughter will not have to lie to her pupils, and where his sons will no longer be taught the majority opinion. Thus, Petra is committed to truth, principle, and general welfare.

As for summing up, my study in Ibsen’s ‘New Women’ exhibits that the dramatist’s all three protagonists in these three dramas change to development and freedom throughout the plays. They never remain the same as their chronicles progress, and Ibsen supports them unquestionably. Their characteristic features get heightened as their stories roll to their climaxes. Their roles all through authenticate their eventual actions and decisions.

My further observation, in this study, is that Ibsen’s Lona, Nora, and Petra; all equally share the properties of the ‘New Woman’ as a literary genre. These three dramatic characters, in fact, guide and haunt the era’s real-life struggle for emancipation of women. It may further be observed that recognition of the qualifications of these three female characters for manumission of women is important for an understanding of Ibsen’s relation to contemporary feminist movements in Europe and America. It was a revolutionary idea when Ibsen created his ‘New Women’. It is Ibsen who, through his depiction of these rebellious women characters in his dramas, introduced on the European stage what is now known as modern theatrical realism. Ibsen created his revolting women through prose dramas of modern life. He gives heroic stature to his women characters and makes them appear as devoting their whole lives to the cause of liberation of women.

My last and most specific observation is that Ibsen’s these three dramas are never three didactic pieces, and his three heroines give, never and in no way, any didactic messages; rather, their actions embody a continuous fight, and encompass a never-failing movement.
Sources and References

