

Plight and Protest of Tess & Nora: A Study of Women in Patriarchal Society

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Abstract—Literature is a reflection of society. The changing role of women in literature from past to present shows the evolution of women and women empowerment. The following paper discusses the psyche and position of women in patriarchal society and how the role of women has evolved in contemporary times. This paper assesses the status of women by analyzing the struggle and predicaments of Nora and Tess, the protagonists of 'A Doll's House' & 'Tess of D'Urbervilles' respectively.

"1. Introduction"

It is widely acknowledged that literature is a mirror of the society. Literature reflects the perceptions and attitudes of the society. It is not wrong to say that literature is witness to evolution of women through ages. The changing role of women in literature from past to present shows the evolution of women and women empowerment. In today's era, women's activities and interests are recognized in literary and cultural fields. They have gained their position in community, openly exercising their rights, and thus are acknowledged as significant members in society. But this was not the case a century ago. A women's place was inside the home and motherhood was considered by society at large to be a sufficient emotional fulfilment for females. Women were solely controlled by the society crafted by men and expected to act as feminine ideal of the period. Assertion of individuality or quest for identity on the part of woman was totally unimaginable in earlier times. The concept of 'The Angel in the House' was referred to the embodiment of the 19th century women. The place of women was secondary in the family; she was considered a crucial cornerstone of social stability from performing her duties towards her family as well as society. Analyzing the women characters in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"; Marge Piercy's "Barbie Doll"; and Adrienne Rich's "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" shows how these expectations affect the behaviors of women and reflect the desire to change the traditional gender roles in the demanding society they are obligated to adhere to. Throughout history, women are constant victims of society's ideals. Women were defined physically and intellectually as the 'weaker' sex, in all ways to subordinate to male authority. They are expected to comply with the ideals set by the society

and as result opportunities are limited to them and their importance in the society is abbreviated. It was clear that the contribution of women in the society was limited and solely controlled under patriarchal society. Women were excluded from the public sphere and forbidden to get involved with politics, legal, or economic affairs as men dominated all decisions about those matters. They could never be allowed to be man's intellectual equal; this was perceived as too challenging, too threatening to most men of the era.

Before the 20th century, women had no legal identity apart from their husbands'. The biological role of women, 'to give birth and take care of offspring' was considered to be the main and only job of women. Women were not allowed to do labor-intensive work, as they were considered to be physically weak. While men were exposed to diverse career opportunities, women's career opportunities were restricted to jobs related the home.

The increased interest of women in social class position drove women to start a movement redefining their traditional roles in the society. This has been seen particularly through literature, when women began to vindicate their rights through writings. The women writers also challenged the patriarchal society and the view that marriage and motherhood were the only careers best suitable for women. The material conditions endured by wives and mothers during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries changed substantially for the better. Through the active participation of some prominent authors such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Marge Piercy, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Adrienne Rich, Thomas Hardy and Henrik Ibsen, works challenged the notion that women were supposed to spend their lives in the private sphere and the ideal traditional family, which often tied women to oppressive relationships, women have achieved a position and attained power in society. Women's lives have changed in permanent and profound ways over the past decades. Through the women's liberation movement that altered people's ideas about the role of women in society, women's roles have changed at an accelerating rate and made a lot of improvement politically,

socially, and educationally, allowing them to have a high place in society.

“2. Tess: Beyond Pure”

In Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Tess, the heroine, has hardships and injustices endlessly heaped upon her, however she never around herself in self-pity or abandons hopes. ”. Society, human selfishness and the hypocritical instinct in people are all guilty of dragging her relentlessly towards her tragic end, while she is innocent and fight against her fate to the end. Tess was a girl-“mighty sensitive for a cottage girl” (Alec). She suffers great difficulties, both physically as well as financially but she never surrendered to her situations and this attitude of her helped her in raising her standards. . The tragedy of her being lies in the co-existence of social norms and instinctual drives simultaneously. She is depicted as a mixture of moral and immoral impulses. Tess's character reveals contradictions inherent in her existence-claiming her right to be considered as an individual in a society which is bent upon reducing woman's status to a mere commodity. She is not like just a passing thought to this world rather wishes to live the life to the fullest . She is a woman who has been treated as a negligent object by the society. Tess was a woman who became victim of the male domination. Women of Victorian era tried there level best to save themselves from the social abuse as a result of their negligence, seduction, purity, etc from the men's side. Because of the societal norms and believes Tess has to undergo hardships to prove her chastity and regain her faith to be able to live peacefully in her society. Geoffrey Harvey writes,

“An important dimension of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is its debt to the oral tradition; to stories about wronged milkmaids, tales of superstition, and stories of love, betrayal and revenge, involving stock figures. ”

Tess is a pure woman by heart and behavior still, she is morally unaccepted by her society as Alec seduces and rapes her. She is considered to be a culprit as a result of Alec's immoral actions. Instead of blaming Alec society blames Tess as a sinner. Society blindly follows the rules of morality and innocent women like Tess is crushed. Thus, society victimizes Tess cruelly and inhumanely. A woman's working and supporting the family during Victorian era was financially, traditionally and morally unaccepted. Marriage and bearing child were considered the ultimate goal for women. Tess faces problems to adjust in her life after she gets married to Angel Clare. When Tess informs Angel about her past with Alec, he becomes very angry and leaves Tess confide in her impurity. Angel Clare decides to leave Tess. Even though he himself once trapped a woman and lives with her for forty-eight hours. This shows the hypocrisy of the society and the discrimination between men and women. Geoffrey Harvey comments,

“Both Alec and Angel regard her as an object of desire, and she becomes their victim, violated by Alec and later

abandoned by her husband. Alec assumes her compliance, while Angel fits her into his Romantic perceptions of society.”

Thomas Hardy describes her as a bird caught in a trap. Existing male domination, men's sexual attitude towards women and the rigidity and harshness of the social attitude towards women victimize tender innocent and helpless individuals like Tess and others. . Tess's contrast with Victorian conventional women can be taken in terms of a double moral standard, which the people of Victorian era took much account of. Premarital sexual intercourse tended to be understood for men, while that of women was never admitted in England at the age of Tess.

In the final phase of her life, she kills Alec, the man who was responsible for most of her sufferings. After she stabs Alec, she regains her consciousness and views herself with a new state of mind. This self-consciousness of Tess corresponds with her extraordinary calmness. Tess represents an ever-increasing growth of disdain and frustration with the Victorian formulaic views of women. She is the kind of woman who withstands against all those who interfere in her life and desires by the end of the novel. Tess shows the capabilities of an introspective woman who can stand up for herself and her rights. As by killing Alec, she takes the command over her own fate.

Tess passes through the ordeal of pain and suffering and regains her conscious state of mind. What she might have made of life, what might have made of her, but by the end she realizes the fact that her happiness is more important than anything else in this world and by this realization she stands up for herself. The act of killing Alec was a rebellious act which was not accepted by the people of that time. Though Tess got hanged for this act, but still she reaches a calm state of mind by doing so as her will is free now and nobody can capture her soul. Tess proves that once when a woman knows about her self-worth she is unstoppable. Tess, therefore, plays the role of a woman deviating but growing out of the oppressive social structure for women. All these sufferings, hardships, malice, and brutality everything helps in the development of finding her true self. Tess's character was too bold for that time and the women wanted that kind of strength which Tess incurred in her. Whereas some critics truly admired the kind of women Tess actually was. J. I. M Stewart: “Yet it is not in the final issue a depressing book...And this is because Tess Durbeyfield herself is as the sun at noon”. Another critic, Irving Howe: “Indeed, she provides a standard of what is right and essential for human beings to demand from life...Tess is finally one of the great images of human possibility, conceived in the chaste, and chastening, spirit of the New Testament”. The evolution of her character as a new woman has found her ‘rest at last’. She remains in the confinements of the society feeling suffocated and helpless, but her struggles throughout leads her to break all the confines and let her feel like a free bird swinging higher and higher in the sky flapping her wings. Tess's strong sense of self and

integrity makes her character more likeable to the readers, as a woman.

Though this novel created a lot of controversy and was rejected by many Victorians, Hardy exposed his vivid portrayal of women and his strong plea for justice. By the character of Tess, Hardy has demonstrated the need for change of the women and to realize their self-worth.

“3. Nora: A Little Songbird to a Self-Assertive Woman”

Ibsen has portrayed the protagonist of his drama, Nora Helmer, in such a way which was not acceptable by the society. Schreiner comments about Ibsen’s play in a letter: ‘It shows some sides of woman’s nature that are not often spoken of, and that some people do not believe exist—but they do’.

When *A Doll’s House* begins, Nora appears to be childish and doll-like, and Torvald, her husband addresses her throughout as if she is a small creature by using phrases like: ‘my little lark’, ‘my little squirrel’, ‘my little spendthrift’, ‘little featherhead’, ‘my sweet little skylark’, ‘my little songbird’, ‘my precious little singing bird’. These demeaning phrases by her husband show how women were treated as a puppet. Women were merely a showpiece who didn’t have any hold on their decisions. Nora seems to be a perfect wife and a doting mother who confines her life under the four walls of her house. The social status of women prior to the onset of 20th century was not satisfactory. At that time, the majority of middle class women found themselves without any help, financial support and belongings. In the Victorian realm of understanding, an ideal woman was considered as the angel in the house, being at the service of this father, husband and children. The traditional conventions about women however started changing during the last decades of the nineteenth century. There was a revolutionary change in women’s needs. Likely, we see a great transformation in the character of Nora as the drama moves forward. Nora, the protagonist, is a New Woman who longs for self-knowledge and individuality. Nora Helmer in Ibsen’s play carries forward the central thematic impulse of patriarchal society. The play is constructed around Nora’s emotional framework. She is placed in the starting of the drama in a domestic, marital and familial world set against the backdrop of a middle-class world. Money, marriage, love, childbearing, nurturing, home keeping and the social positioning of Nora all shows the status of hers in society. Throughout the drama we see different faces of her own character. The shifting face of Nora’s character from a dutiful wife and loving mother to self-conscious human being, a woman with modern consciousness shows the drastic and a much needed change in her character.

“The wife in the play ends by having no idea of what is right or wrong, natural feelings on one hand and belief in authority on the other have altogether bewildered her woman cannot be herself in the society of the day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a

judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view”. (William Archer, 1912 91-92)

Nora is a kind of character which doesn’t remain static throughout. Her entry in the play is marked by her joyful mood, her extravagant nature, her love for her children and her duty and concern for her husband. She plays the role of a doll that just lives her life according to her husband and lacks of her own identity. Her eagerness at the Christmas tree, her eating of macaroons by taking it up from her pocket, her humming a tune to herself is some of the petty acts that she does in the beginning of the play. They show her childlike behavior, her eagerness and her complete indulgence in the world created up her husband for him which keeps her far away from getting her own identity. This is the stage of Nora’s life where she has been forced by Torvald to live by. . She performs the act of forgery just to save her husband’s life and doesn’t bother about anything else. Though, she knew this act was immoral and illegal but at that time saving Torvald’s life was her true priority. But Torvald would rather die than break the law or borrow money. This difference in their thought was what trapping Nora. To Nora, saving a human life is more important than following social conventions that require too many formalities ignoring the truth that ‘existence precedes essence’, that nothing is truer than humanity. She performs all the duties of a loving wife and shows herself as an obedient wife. Torvald, on the other hand behaves like a very traditional husband. Even after the married life of eight years, he fails to consider his wife as his companion rather than the object possessed and conveniently utilized. Right from the beginning of the play, we observe Torvald’s egoistic and morally stern attitude. He seems to be a loving husband but a closer analysis shows that there is more of pretension in his attitude than reality. He appears to be a teacher than a husband. He considers himself to be as the master of his household, he wishes that his wife should conform to the rules that he himself has laid down.

Nora in her past eight years of marriage did everything possible to support his family when it needed. She even borrowed-though illegally and by forging her father’s signature of commitment to repay the money- from Krogstad to save Helmer’s life, when he was sick without his own knowledge. She has kept “this unhappy secret” for a long time in order not to hurt Helmer: “...Besides, Torvald has his pride most men have- he’d be terribly hurt and humiliated if he thought he owed anything to me. It’d spoil everything between us, and our lovely happy home would never be the same again”. (*A Doll’s House*: pg. no-161). Torvald has always treated her as a child. The family disintegration begins when Helmer is promoted to the manager of the bank where Krogstad, being accused of forgery, is on the verge of losing his low-level job position. Krogstad knows Nora’s forgery of her now-dead father’s signature and is going to use it as a pretext to have Nora put force on her husband in order to keep him in the bank. Nora, therefore, is misused not just by

Krogstad but by her father and husband too-or we can say by the whole patriarchal society.

Nora after disclosing the truth to her husband expects that Torvald will too remain morally upright and, on principle, defend Nora's honor but he refuses that he would not make the sacrifice, shattering Nora's dream world. Helmer's immature reaction brings Nora to a new understanding which she was unknown of until then- that she should take herself out of her husband's care, as she says "...you don't understand me. And I've never understood you- until tonight...listen to what I've to say. Torvald, this is reckoning." (A Doll's House: pg. no-224). This moment of understanding is the turning point in Nora's life as well as in the play. Nora is willing to take herself out of Torvald's care. She is aware of the power of education: "Ah, Torvald, you're not the man to teach me to be a real wife to you". (A Doll's House: pg. no-226). In her thoughts of the past, Nora finds out she has always been governed and owned by men who misunderstood and abused her: "you have never understood me. I have been dreadfully wronged, Torvald- first by Papa then by you" (A Doll's House: pg. no-225)). She leaves and releases herself from the marriage because she thinks she deserves an equal respect.

When Nora comes to the realization that her character was molded on the basis of the societal and other's expectations, she recognizes that the strong principled Torvald she thought she was married to was only a character formed out of her own expectations. Now Nora is outspoken. She realizes that their home was nothing but a mere 'playroom'. She no longer wants to be instrumental to this game. Her husband fails to pacify her victimized soul. She now no longer longs for what the world will say if she leaves her husband and children. Nora discovers her identity to be a human being first. She realizes the fact that the most important duty she ever has to perform is towards her. Now she denies her identity as a wife and mother,

"I don't believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a human being- just as much as you are... or at any rate I shall try to become one" (A Doll's House: pg. no-228).

Finally she realizes that she has been living in illusion; and one doesn't die for illusions if one recognizes them. It is the male-dominated society that has undermined her to a suffocating life. Helmer's society leaves Nora no alternative to plunging into the ocean of uncertainty so as to find her self-identity. She has gone through a lot of hardships which has made her realize her worth and now she is convinced that her husband's attitude to her can change at any point of time and she can bow to his changing moods mutely. She finds no point in living with her husband, as there is no love and respect for her in that house. Nora chooses to expose herself to the outside world that is unknown to her but spacious enough for her to find out her own place.

Ibsen in his play A Doll's House highlights the day to day contemporary reality of a middle class family. Though the

play shows the male chauvinistic society, it also deals with various problems. A doll with a human figure is normally found in the hands of children, who make the doll act according to their wish. Similarly, Nora was a doll in the hands of three persons, namely Torvald Helmer, Krogstad, and her father. Nora is judged from the eyes of men. Not even a single room is given for her wish or her passion or her emotion; rather she is treated as a puppet, whose acts are controlled by their masters. Struggling through all this, Nora decides to emancipate herself. In spite of Helmer's apologies, Nora slammed the door against her husband. George Bernard Shaw says:

"The slam of the door behind her is more momentous than the cannon of Waterloo or Sedan".

Often men feel that women who are docile are the perfect wife materials since they feel that such women would hardly raise their voices to protect their own rights and continue to be silent. But in many a case we might see that such docile women are the ones who revolt more often. Before distinguishing ones gender it is more vital to see oneself as human beings first. Saying this, it is essential to provide the rights to each human being so that the question of fighting for it needs not to rise at all. If it is not the case then there will be many Nora who would continue to revolt; both within and outside domestic phrases. Emancipation of Nora is a trumpet call for the women of the day to raise banner of revolt to press for their lost rights.

"4. Conclusion"

Literature has witnessed the roles of women evolving through ages. As, literature is considered to be the mirror of society, the depiction of women in books has changed along with society. The situation of women depicted in literary works earlier was more of concern as they were deprived of their rights. Women were considered a mere commodity. But with time, standard and position of women changed in society. As women gained equality, heroine continued to change. The heroines definitely come to a decision which can be read as a representation of their struggle for recognition- such assurance and endeavor of a woman can be taken as a victory for the women movement. By studying these changes, it is observed that not only do the characters embody the female identity, but also the heroines transform into the new figures women aspire to be.

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