

A Comprehensive Study of Female Autonomy in A Doll's House and Selected Early Buddhist Suttas

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Abstract

This research paper discusses a comparison of female independence that is shown in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) and the early Buddhist Suttas which are mainly from the Samyutta Nikāya and Therīgāthā. Both the two different contexts have something in common as they both present the women's selfhood, moral agency, and liberation from the oppressive social structures. The researcher claims that Ibsen's Nora Helmer personifies the existential awakening that is synonymous with the Buddhist concept of emancipation (vimutti) overcoming bondage through ignorance (avijjā) and attachment

(taṇhā). The comparative hermeneutic method of the study highlights the fact that both modernist feminism of Ibsen and the Buddhist soteriological framework centered transformation not only as social independence but also as that of spiritual and ethical liberation. In the same way as *A Doll's House* portrays the woman's battle for self-affirmation within the limits of patriarchy, the Suttas show the woman's path in spiritual terms towards enlightenment. This conversation between Ibsen and early Buddhist thought uncovers a universal story of liberation from ignorance, dependency, and subjugation placing female autonomy as both a striving that is humanistic and transcendent.

Keywords: A Doll's House, Comparative Study, Early Buddhist Suttas, Female Autonomy, Patriarchy.

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Research Questions

Main Research Question

- How do *A Doll's House* and selected Early Buddhist Suttas theorize and represent women's agency, and in what ways do these positions intersect or conflict regarding liberation and moral agency?

Sub-questions

1. How does Nora Helmer's liberation in *A Doll's House* compare with the spiritual liberation of women in early Buddhist texts such as the *Therīgāthā* and *Samyutta Nikāya*?
2. How does Ibsen's critique of patriarchal domesticity resonate with the Buddhist critique of attachment and ignorance as bondage?
3. How do Ibsen and the Buddhist Suttas recast the conception of "self" in relation to freedom, ethics, and responsibility?
4. What are the hermeneutical gains of placing Ibsen's secular humanism in juxtaposition with the Buddhist soteriological ideal of liberation (*nibbāna*)?
5. In what ways can this cross-cultural dialogue between Western modernist drama and Buddhist scripture illuminate the universality of women's existential search for autonomy?

Introduction

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) and the early Buddhist Suttas would seem to

be culturally and philosophically miles apart. Ibsen's play, for one thing, is a typical modern European work of art from the nineteenth century and a realist portrayal of gender and marital conflicts in bourgeois society, while the Suttas, on the other hand, are mainly spiritual texts written in India over 2,500 years ago, discussing the ways to get rid of suffering. However, both works are highly concerned with the individual's liberty and, especially, women's liberty, who are fighting against the oppressions and deceptions of that period.

Among the Suttas are the Discourses in *Samyutta Nikāya*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, and *Therīgāthā*, which frequently recognize women's spiritual capacity and their right to enlightenment. The characters of *Khemā*, *Uppalavannā*, and *Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesī* are examples of and great representatives of the so-called "enlightened women" of the Buddhist times who lived their lives without being attached to the world and did not let the society dictate their lives. Likewise, Ibsen's Nora Helmer metamorphoses from a compliant wife and mother—a "doll" molded by social expectations—into a self-aware person claiming moral and existential independence.

The current research suggests that Ibsen's Nora's awakening can be comprehended in terms of early Buddhist views of liberation from ignorance and craving. Though the Buddhist setting sees freedom as being made possible through spiritual and moral self-realization, the opposite is the case with Ibsen's humanism, which situates it in

terms of moral awareness and social activism. By bringing these different traditions into conversation, the study shows an intercultural coming together on the issue of female autonomy as a realization of one's true self, the quest for knowledge and liberation.

Literature Review

1. Feminism and Ibsen's A Doll's House

Critical essays point out A Doll's House as one of the main works in the evolution of feminist dramatic literature. Ibsen (1879) claimed that he had not written the play as a means of propagating women's rights and even went as far as to say that Nora's quitting of her husband and kids to find herself is one of the most audacious declarations of female independence in the literary world (Templeton, 1997). Theologians like Moi (2006) and Johnston (1989) stress that Nora's liberation is profoundly not just social but also existential, an awakening of the moral self.

The play takes off the mask of patriarchy, represented by Torvald Helmer, the father, whose patronising and ethically unsightedness stand for the social structures that treat women as children. Nora's coming to terms with the fact that she has been living under the banner of "I've been your doll-wife, just as at home I was Papa's doll-child" signifies her mental freeing from the world of lies, which is akin to what Buddhism calls coming out of *avijjā* (ignorance) or rather the awakening from the darkness of the mind.

2. Female Liberation in Early Buddhist Texts

Early Buddhist writings, typically misinterpreted as patriarchal, actually unveil a revolutionary notion of gender equality at least in the liberation aspect of the spiritual domain. The *Therīgāthā* (verses of enlightened nuns) and the *Samyutta Nikāya* praise female renunciants achieving arahantship (full enlightenment). Among them are two famous names, *Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesī*, who turns her back on sensuality and egoism, and *Kisāgotamī*, whose realisation of impermanence due to losing her child is a case in point of spiritual detachment (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995)

Academics like Gross (1993) and Harvey (2013) claim that the early Buddha practically reversed the traditional gender hierarchies by highlighting the universal suffering (*dukkha*) and the equal possibility of both men and women for liberation. This viewpoint pictures self-assertiveness as spiritual awakening rather than social rebellion, although the latter also involves, like the former, a turning away from reliance and illusion.

3. Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy

The conversation between Eastern spiritual philosophy and Western modernist thought has been taking place in comparative literature and intercultural philosophy (Ganeri, 2012; Damrosch, 2003). Both of them ask questions about the bondage of man, the selfhood, and the ways of liberation.

The modernism of Ibsen and the ethical realism of the Buddha are united in their belief that liberation is attainable through awareness and moral insight.

Ibsen's plot is set in the world of social realism, while the Buddha's teachings are in spiritual metaphysics, yet both of them come to an ethical project of self-knowledge. The merging of these two lines of thought gives rise to the general assertion that the female character's independence in both stories symbolises release from the oppressions of the outside world (patriarchal society) and the sufferings of the inside world (ignorance, attachment, ego).

Methodology

The paper presents a comparative hermeneutic method that combines literary criticism and Buddhist philosophical analysis, which is the mainstay of the study. The aim is not to indicate a direct influence between Ibsen's works and Buddhist texts but rather to create a cross-cultural interpretive dialogue which ultimately reveals the universality of female autonomy as a human quest.

The examination goes through two periods:

1. Uncovering and explaining liberation, ignorance, and attachment as the main themes in both *A Doll's House* and Suttas.
2. Drawing out the philosophical similarities and differences between Ibsen's feminist existentialism and the Buddhist viewpoint of liberation.

The main texts are *A Doll's House* (Ibsen, 1879) and selected verses from *Therīgāthā* and *Samyutta Nikāya* (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995). The texts of secondary literature consist of feminist literary criticism (Moi, 2006; Templeton, 1997) and Buddhist philosophy (Rahula, 1974; Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013).

Analysis and Discussion

The issue of female autonomy that both Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and the early Buddhist Suttas handle comes out as quite a journey leading to liberation. Such liberation is through a metamorphosis that overcomes both societal and personal constraints. Ibsen's protagonist Nora Helmer's existential awakening and spiritual enlightenment of female characters in Buddhist texts reveal very similar ways to autonomy by rejecting the triad of ignorance, attachment, and paternal control.

Ignorance (*Avijjā*) and Awareness in Nora's Awakening

In the early Buddhist theological system, ignorance or *avijjā* was not only a lack of knowledge but a kind of death to the self and a negative attitude toward life itself. The latter leads one to desire (*taṇhā*) and thus to experience suffering (*dukkha*) since one does not see the transient nature of life and the same nature of all existence. In this light, Nora's initial ignorance in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* can be seen as very analogous to the Buddhist concept. She believes that keeping her roles as a good wife and mother is the only way of being moral for her, so she does not

even think about the system that is her prison. She does not realise that her worth as a person is totally dependent on her husband's, Torvald's, judgment.

The pivotal moment in Nora's life comes when she recognises the deception behind her part in the family. Her light-bulb moment, marked by her acknowledgement of her oppression as a “doll-wife,” is nothing but her emancipation from *avijjā*. This instant is similar to the Buddhist awakening process when one passes from the delusion of the self-limited to societal roles and external validation towards the comprehension of *anatta* (non-self) and impermanence. Nora's giving up Torvald is a significant denial of the false consciousness enforced by the social order, and at the same time, the Buddhist route purges one of all co-dependencies and ignorance, leading to the liberation of perceiving the world as it is, clear and uncoloured by the dark side of attachments and ignorance.

Attachment (*Taṇhā*) and Detachment (*Vairāgya*)

In Buddhism, the attachment or *taṇhā* is considered the foremost cause of suffering, thereby keeping human beings imprisoned in the circular movement of *samsāra* (the birth-rebirth cycle). This attachment refers not solely to the material things but also to the emotional and social bonds between people. Nora is an emblematic example of this attachment since it comes in her dependency on her role as a wife and mother, her ideal image of a loving spouse, and her dependency

on Torvald for emotional support. This attachment is restrictive and takes away her independence, thus confining her to a life that is socially performed rather than personally authentic.

Throughout the course of the play, Nora's character undergoes a transition from the state of attachment to the state of detachment (*vairāgya*). She starts to free herself from the need for external validation, which could be either his husband's praise or society's expectations. The fact that she finally decides to leave her husband, notwithstanding the emotional and social costs involved, is a sign of her movement towards *vairāgya*, which is similar to the Buddhist path of renunciation, where one gives up worldly desires to obtain spiritual freedom. Her leaving Torvald is an act of detachment from those treatments which have been the basis of her identity, and it is also comparable to the Buddhist practice of renouncing worldly attachments to achieve spiritual liberation.

Moral Agency and Kamma

Moral agency, through the Buddhist Suttas and *A Doll's House*, is a very important factor in the liberation process. In Buddhist philosophy, *kamma* is the moral law of cause and effect, and every man's action comes from moral volition (*cetanā*). And the results of the actions, be they good or bad, determine one's future. Nora's act of signing her father's name to get a loan for Torvald's treatment can be seen as ethically unclear, yet it still demonstrates her agency in a reluctant moment to keep

the family financially stable.

With every step that Nora takes in her consciousness, she gradually learns the moral implications of her deeds, especially how she has violated her morals to meet society's demands. Her awakening is a signal of her shift from passive submission to active moral agency. By opting to leave Torvald and taking the path of responsibility with her future, Nora guarantees her control over her moral course. This deed is quite similar to the Buddhist idea of kamma, wherein moral self-awareness and volitional actions are viewed as the ways to liberate oneself from the cycle of pain. Just as the arahants in the Therīgāthā take up the burden of their own enlightenment, Nora's decision to quit her marriage marks her acceptance of moral responsibility, her being, in turn, the signal of her moral emancipation.

Non-Self (Anatta) and the Reconstruction of Identity

The Buddhist doctrine of anatta denotes that there is no self that is permanent and unchanging. The self, rather, is a composite of changing aggregates (khandhas) and thus no identity is fixed. The latter teaching of non-self is, in fact, one of the two main pillars of Buddhist enlightenment, since the person underbidding his/her/their self realises that their suffering comes wholly from clinging to a fixed self. The whole range of Nora's transformation in the play is a case in point for this concept of non-self. Nora, whenever she gives up her identity as a wife and mother, two roles

that she did not choose, rather, they were imposed on her, Nora is acting out the very process of self-construction. Leaving Torvald is the very first step of hers toward a real self-creation, which is not a self of the society's expectations but of the individual's true self.

The same is true with the women enlightened in the Therīgāthā, like Kisāgotamī and Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesī, who went through the same process of self-reconstruction as Nora. By giving away the last traces of worldly connections and the ego, they become aware of the transience of their identities. Just Think! The societal definitions of roles and identities that these Buddhist nuns give up are the same from which they experience a spiritual rebirth akin to that of Nora's reconstruction of her selfhood. In both cases, the shedding of the self dictated by others (society, marriage, etc.) is the basis for coming out with an identity that is more genuine and liberated.

Liberation (Vimutti) and the Feminine Ideal of Freedom

In the early days of Buddhism, vimutti symbolised the freedom from rebirth and death, with this freedom granted through the spiritual insight of the practitioner, the purity of the moral life, and the eradication of craving (taṇhā) as the final step. The liberation aspired by the female characters in the Buddhist Suttas is the twofold liberation of detachment from the world and the disillusionment with self, which eventually leads to nibbāna (enlightenment). Nora's move to quit her marriage could be interpreted

as a type of *vimutti*, a letting go of the oppressive patriarchal forces that have held her captive. Nora's choice to set herself free from the marriage as well as her "doll-wife" role signifies a personal victory over the shackles of social norms, reflecting the Buddhist pursuit of liberation from suffering and illusion.

Nora's freedom, though, is based on a moral self-discovery and rebellion against patriarchy, while the liberation portrayed in the Buddhist Suttas is nothing less than a higher enlightenment, *nibbāna*. In spite of this, the two liberations are in a way similar by being an affirmation of free will and the rejection of both outside and inside oppressors. The process of Nora can be considered a non-religious counterpart to the Buddhist search for liberation, since both stories tell the same about the power of independence as a way to self-overcoming and self-awareness.

Conclusion

This comparative study offers an illustration of the similarities and differences in the portrayal of female autonomy as a process of liberation, existential and ethical between Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and the early Buddhist Suttas. The metamorphosis of Nora Helmer from ignorance to self-awareness, from attachment to detachment, and from subservience to independence is a parallel to the Buddhist journey from *avijjā* (ignorance) to *vimutti* (liberation). The story of Ibsen is set in a secular, humanist context of personal emancipation from patriarchy, whereas the Buddhist path culminates

in spiritual enlightenment, yet both discourses are met at the point where they acknowledge that autonomy is fostered by self-knowledge, moral agency, and the rejection of false identities and attachments. The intercultural dialogue between these two traditions reveals a universal model for the liberation of women's freedom as the realisation of truth, self-determination, and liberation from the forces of patriarchy, ignorance, and illusion.

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