

## **Women's Psyche and Trap of Patriarchal Discourse: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of *A Doll's House***

**Dr. Balkar Singh, M.A. (English), M.Phil. (English), Ph.D. (English)**

**HOD, Verbal Ability (English)**

**Lovely Professional University**

**[Thakurbalkar.thakur@gmail.com](mailto:Thakurbalkar.thakur@gmail.com)**

### **Abstract**

Language is all pervasive and universal entity in the civilized world and thus also a cradle to the prison houses that are fostered and circulated through social and civil apparatus. Men and women are the social binaries and their positioning is defined by their conditioning through power apparatus. The productivity attached to this complete system makes social subjects to internalize this schema and they reproduce and reiterate same values according to the variable context. Thus, social subjects are never able to move out of the vicious circle of power discourses; however, fault lines are possible if the subject assume the position of an analyst. Nora in *The Doll House* is also victim of the trap of all-pervasive patriarchal discourse, but she debunks it when she understands the hollowness of the apparatus. She realises that she is the one who was making this system as inevitable.

**Keywords:** *A Doll's House*, Women's Psyche, Trap of Patriarchy, Social and Civil apparatus, social binaries, fault lines, analyst, patriarchal discourse

Language, a universal entity of human society, plays a significant role in the "production, maintenance, and change of social relations of power" (Fairclough, *Language and Power* 1). Language is an easily assessable tool of study for studying human behaviour and societal unequal power relations, but to trace back its root to the power relations is an abstract and difficult process. It is an integral part of the society that reflects the open play of power apparatus in the society; however, its universality deludes the unaware users and hides its duality. "Sociolinguistics conventions have a dual relation to power: on the one hand they incorporate difference of power, on the other hand they arise out of – and give rise to – particular relations of power" (Fairclough, *Language and Power* 1-2). Norman Fairclough explained very well the relationship between Language and society:

My view is that there is no external relationship ‘between’ language and society, but an external and dialectical relationship. Language is a part of society; linguistics phenomena *are* social phenomena of a special sort, and social phenomena *are* (in part) linguistics phenomena. (Fairclough, *Language and Power* 23)

In the light of above quotation, it can be concluded that langue and parole both are influenced by the society. Whereas, language shapes the mentality of its speakers; speakers’ social position determines the validity of language. Social conventions make its way into the language of individual by its exposure to different social norms. Meantime, social taboos also make its backdoor entry into the unconscious of social subjects and from their unconscious to their conscious language behaviour. Sigmund Freud (who in his works popularised the notion like unconscious, defence mechanism, Freudian slips and dream symbolism) insists that our language behaviour is affected by our unconscious conditioning. As he states in his book *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*:

To obtain at any rate a glimpse of them it is necessary in the first place to call to mind the truth established by modern psychology, that unconscious phenomena play an altogether preponderating part not only in organic life, but also in the operations of the intelligence. The conscious life of the mind is of small importance in comparison with its unconscious life. (8)

Thus, according to Freud, unconscious rules the conscious part of life. Lacan in his famous comments “unconscious is the discourse of Other” refers the effect of socio-contextual influence on the use of language (101). Foucault added another flavour by expanding the scope of language analyses by giving the concept of all-pervasive power mechanism. People internalize the available resources and reproduce according to the suitable conditions. In such scenarios, social subjects never able to move out of the vicious circle “one remains within the dimensions of discourse” (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 85). So, linguistics phenomena are the product of social processes. As linguistics phenomena are social, most of the social contests and conflicts are linguistics in nature. Our access to the reality and of the world is always through the language. By the usage of language, we create the representation of the world; however, that is just the pre-reflection of already existing world around us but construction of reality is done only through decoding it into the language. That’s why same incident or event is described by different individual in different manner.

Oppression is said to be rooted ultimately in the way in which we and others are defined linguistically, the way in which we are positioned by words in relation to other words, or by

---

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 19:3 March 2019

Dr. Balkar Singh

Women’s Psyche and Trap of Patriarchal Discourse: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of *A Doll’s House*

codes which are said to be “structured like language” (Lacan 34). Our very being, our subjectivities, our identities are constituted through language. “Language is thus final prison house. Our confinement there is beyond resistance; it is impossible to escape from that which makes us what we are” (David McNally 26). Imprisoned within language, we may play with words; but we can never hope to liberate ourselves from immutable structures of oppression rooted in. According to Marx and Angel, human beings produce ideas as part of the production of the totality of their conditions of life. Raymond Williams comments:

The real communicative ‘products’ which are usable signs are, on the contrary, living evidence of a continuing social process, into which individuals are born and within which they are shaped, but to which they then also actively contribute, in a continuing process (*Marxism* 37).

Male and female are two social binaries and in these two entities the free play of power is the most evident. Apart from biological differences, female and male are socially and most prominently are poles apart linguistically. The speech act of these social subjects and most specifically these two social binaries takes place in ever changing socio-historic context. There are elements of historically formed stereotypes, typecasts, collective consciousness, biased attitude, and archetypes of ideology. These elements even surface in the so called personal and private spheres. Gesture, posture, word choices, syntax and acceptability of signs and symbols all are social in nature. It is surprisingly curious to note that there are many words and expressions that are gender specific due to the role assigned to both the sexes even when they are employing same language to communicate in the same society. There are some taboos that are gender specific. It is matter of social attitude. Whereas males are allowed to be creative, women are considered to follow the norms as deviation from their side can come under taboos. Languages are predominantly male, and images and metaphors of language can be male centric and oppressive to female. Females are also social counterpart and thus language shapes their mentality and their linguistic and social behaviour is scrutinized and authenticated by linguistic elements. This complex socio-linguistic process also determines the unconscious conditioning of the social subjects. Thus, the psyche of female is trapped into the male centric linguistic signs, images and metaphors.

*A Doll’s House* by Henry Ibsen displays the socio-linguistic disparity and patriarchal categorization of social roles. Authenticity of these discourses directly flows from social apparatus. In *A Doll’s House*, Helmer uses domesticating images and belittling symbols like “little lark twittering” (Ibsen 1), “my squirrel” (2), “my little skylark” (4), “like your father” (5), “little song-bird” (34), “my obstinate little woman” (35), “Just listen!—little Nora talking about scientific investigations!” (80), “You are out of your mind! I won’t allow it! I forbid you!” (91),

---

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 19:3 March 2019

Dr. Balkar Singh

Women’s Psyche and Trap of Patriarchal Discourse: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of *A Doll’s House*

“You blind, foolish woman!” (91), for Nora. This bird imagery delineates the position of Nora in her doll’s house. She is like an object of entertainment- a little singing bird. Nora in response never rebuffs, but always giggles in acceptance. She feels that it is important to endorse Helmer for her social outing. For the party, she wants to dress up as per the instructions of Helmer. She lives in this oppressed atmosphere for such a long time that she feels she cannot do anything without the help of her husband as she admits to her husband, “Yes, Torvald, I can’t get along a bit without your help” (35). Throughout her life she lives like a poor person to make her husband happy and her existence for her husband is just to perform tricks for him. Her home is like a playroom like a doll’s house as she feels happy when her husband plays with her, but whenever it pleases him, he abandons her. This situation works like an eye opener for Nora and she realizes first time in her life that she never have had a serious conversation with her husband and she is always wronged by males, “I have been greatly wronged, Torvald—first by papa and then by you” (87) and she is never loved by her husband. She comes to know that her husband “thought it pleasant to be in love with” her (87).

It is perfectly true, Torvald. When I was at home with papa, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed from him, I concealed the fact, because he would not have liked it. He called me his doll child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls. And when I came to live with you (89)

Helmer is able to control Nora’ behaviour and recourse it as he desires due to his control over money, as his job is the one which renders the money. And for this small amount of money she is blamed as “extravagant little person” (4) and her heritance is bring in by stating “you are an odd little soul. Very like your father. You always find some new way of wheedling money out of me, and, as soon as you have got it, it seems to melt in your hands” (5). While having conversation with her childhood friend Christine, both of them wear their sacrifices as medals. Nora reveals that how she generates money while Helmer was ill. She states, “You are just like all the others. They all think that I am incapable of anything really serious” (13). It is patriarchal society where a woman is not allowed to “borrow without her husband’s consent” (15). Helmer believes that Nora spends a lot on dresses and other luxury goods albeit she uses this money to return the debt. Other than that she earns money by copying and she feels, “it was like being a man” (17). Nora does want to talk about business as she feels, “it is so tiresome. (19). Krogstad threatens her that he will reveal her secret of borrowing money from him and the she will lose her respect in front of her husband. Helmer blames women for immorality in the society as he states, “almost everyone who has gone to the bad early in life has had a deceitful mother” (36). He also disgraces the professions taken by women as he states, “in the case of knitting—that can

never be anything but ungraceful; look here—the arms close together, the knitting needles going up and down—it has a sort of Chinese effect” (77).

Both the sexes have different preferences. Helmer believes that women’s most sacred duty is towards her husband and children. Because as a woman before all else she is a wife and mother. Phyllis Katz rightly states, “Each sex has typically been reinforced for engaging in behavior designated as appropriate (i.e., masculine for males, feminine for females), and one’s psychological experience of gender was presumed to reflect this basic bipolarity” (53). Nora under the influence of patriarchal society believed in same norms, but at the moment of actualization she defies this logic and states:

I don’t believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are—or, at all events that I must try and become one. I know quite well, Torvald, that most people would think you right, and that views of that kind are to be found in books; but I can no longer content myself with what most people say, or with what is found in books. I must think over things for myself and get to understand them. (92)

Nora realizes that female is biological, but feminine is a culturally fostered idea. Helmer brings another tool of oppression- religion- to stop Nora as he states that it is her religion to take care of her husband and children, but Nora defies it by stating, “I am afraid, Torvald, I do not exactly know what religion is (92). Nora realises that as a social subject Nora is never above her husband’s honour as he states, “I would gladly work night and day for you, Nora—bear sorrow and want for your sake. But no man would sacrifice his honour for the one he loves” (94) which according to Nora was “a thing hundreds of thousands of women have done (94). Nora wants to take Helmer’s doll away from him so that he can realise the importance of woman in his life and at this moment Helmer realises, “She is gone. (*A hope flashes across his mind.*) The most wonderful thing of all—?” (97). Peggy Reeves Sanday states

Religious and secular codes, such as those found in the Garden of Eden Story and in the Declaration of Independence, present basic prepositions regarding expected behavior. Often these prepositions explicate the relationship between the sexes and the meaning of being male and female. (15)

Nora at last realises that to free herself she needs to be more independent. She states, “You are not the man to help me in that. I must do that for myself. And that is why I am going to leave you now “(91). Nora understands that she needs to understand the cultural politics that drives her away from an authentic social subject. Asia Friedman observes:

Genetically speaking, males and females are in fact 98 percent identical. Yet the cultural notion of “opposite” sexes expands that 2 percent difference to 100 percent. Indeed, when we pointedly attend to the specificity and complexity of human bodies, it becomes immediately evident that it is social, not biological, logic that leads us to see male and female bodies as “opposites.” Only by social measures are we more different than similar. (4)

---

---

### Works Cited

- Fairclough, Norman. *Language and Power*. UK: Longman Group. 1989. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press. 1949. Print.
- Friedman, Asia. *Blindness to Sameness: Sexpectations and the Social Construction of Male and Female Bodies*. London: The University of Chicago Press, Ltd. 2013. Print.
- Ibsen, Henry. *A Doll’s House*. UK: Dodo Press. 1923. Print.
- Katz, Phyllis A. “Gender Identity: Development and Consequences”. *The Social Psychology of Female-Male Relations*. Ed. Richard D. Ashmore and Frances K. Delboca. Florida: Academic Press Inc. 1986. Print.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Le Seminaire, Livre XVII; L’envers de la lapsychanalyse* quoted by Mark Bracher, “On the psychological and Social Function of Language: Lacan’s theory of Four discourses.” Ed. Mark Bracher et al. *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*. New York & London: New York University Press, 1994. Print.
- Lacan, Jacques. “The insistence of the letter in the unconscious.” *Modern Criticism and Theory*. Ed. David lodge and Nigel Wood. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley Pvt. Ltd. 2007. Print.
- McNally, David. “Language, History, and class struggle.” *In Defence of History*. Ed. Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster. Delhi: Aakar Books, 2006. Print.
- Sanday, Peggy Reeves. *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origin of Sexual Inequality*. NY: Cambridge University Press. 1983. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. Print.
- 
-

