

A Cross Cultural Analysis of *the Holy Woman* and *A Doll's House* Against the Backdrop of Marxist Feminism

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ABSTRACT

*This study aims to investigate how patriarchy creates impediments in the way of women's monetary empowerment. Further, it aims to analyze man-made restraints in property share and economic-led opportunities. For this, two diverse societies of Pakistan and Norway have been examined and research is framed under the notion of Marxist feminism. Marxist feminists believe in and work on equal door of chances for both genders in earning their livelihoods. In *The Holy Woman* by Qaisra Shahraz and *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, female protagonists Nora and Zari Bano suffer from and struggle against the economic constraints and become source of inspiration for others. Authors openly criticize patriarchy and its role in making women economically weak. In a parallel fashion, both find their ways to acknowledge women's role in economic sphere in their respective societies of East and West. At the end, in given circumstances both female major characters discover financial independency and take stand against capitalism. Thus, they break the chain of making women subordinate against the monetary gain in the society. Research is descriptive in nature and adopts a qualitative approach to explore the required themes through textual examination.*

Keywords: Marxist Feminism, Patriarchy, Women's Monetary Empowerment, Capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

Woman's participation and plight in the economic field is more deplorable than man in the world. This unbalanced structure and exploitation results in the subordination of women in a society. The research article is the study of women empowerment against the backdrop of economic advancement by investigating Qaisra Shahraz's novel *The Holy Woman* (2001) and Henrik Ibsen's dramatic work *A Doll's House* (1879). In both the literary genres,

women's economic rights and conditions are not different in the West and East. The writers of both literary pieces become medium in throwing light on monetary conditions of women. However, both authors have been much criticized by the patriarchal system.

Marxist feminism is the notion taken from Friedrich Engel's work *On the Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) that caters to women's economic needs. His due strategy is to replace women's monetary exploitation into monetary opportunities for their better lives. The advocates of Marxist feminism raise voice for freedom and unearth the economic ailment of women in the world. The elimination of females from socio-economic streamline and market has been major policy of social representatives. Even though, their contribution in economic earning sphere is less and is least acknowledged. Shahrzad Mojab (2015) states in her work *Marxism and Feminism* that:

“Global events, from economic crisis to social unrest, disproportionality affect women. Yet around the world it is also women who are leading the struggle against oppression and exploitation” (Mojab, p. 01).

Marxist feminism is not a new concept and notion to provide economic rights to women. Further it cannot easily be denied that women have been making struggle to achieve due status in monetary sphere. First, they become victims at home and then outside the wall. In this regard, women are always offered backseats and least avenues to avail economic opportunities themselves. Men, controlling the patriarchal circle, are free to go everywhere, and have access to financial affairs. This freedom leads men to manipulate the economic justice and healthy social relations between man and woman. The tactics used by men are as Kathi Weeks pronounces in *The Problem with Work* as “centerpiece of capitalist economic system” (Weeks, 2011, p. 6).

The very research paper will analyze the economic oppression and women's door of opportunities in both Norwegian and Pakistani societies. Pakistan is still under developing country with power ideology of patriarchal system. On the other hand, Norwegian is a developed one as compared to Pakistan.

The writer of the Play *A Doll's House*, Henrik Ibsen wants the emancipation of women from the salvation and confinement. He revolts against the economic dependency and male supremacy in all around social circle. He comes up with promising theme for women in European literature.

Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* comes out with challenging economic issues and its impact on women's lives prevalent in internal Sindh of Pakistan. Her motive is to bring women's economic issues into the limelight to find the solutions. This contemporary writer identifies the socio-economic and religious factors

as this amalgamation creates mammoth obstacles in empowering women economically. In her interview with Shahid Baig at the launch of her new book in Chicago 2010, she says:

“I want to see every woman in work and they will have better opportunities in life” (Baig, 2010).

Study is descriptive in nature and adopts a qualitative approach to explore the related themes. Theoretically, it explores Marxist Feminist notion through textual examination.

DISCUSSION

A Doll's House is a prominent literary work propagating monetary justice for women. It provides boost up and encouragement to socially considered weak creature to make herself strong, and capable financially. No doubt, this play had changed the mindset of people of the Norwegian society. The Play is “an effort to set women free from the traditional shackles they were fettered with by the male-dominated society” (Uddin, 2013).

The play aims to launch the criticism against male supremacy. The title *A Doll's House* itself is very symbolic referring a doll who is residing inside the house without rights, emotions and self-identity. She is shackled to the different religious and patriarchal dogmas to fulfill them. The play establishes a link with Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar* too where the sound of bell is not heard outside the jar. Henrik Ibsen successfully constructs Nora as his mouthpiece and rebellious against all ill customs.

The play provides a picturesque description of Norwegian society. In 19th century, elite class was dominant in legal and socio-economic spheres. Nonetheless, females were given limited rights in earning their livelihood and their contributions were less acknowledged at social or state level. Nisar Uddin states the same plight of women in Norwegian society in his article:

“They were taken to be material possessions rather than human beings and looked upon as decorative members of the household. Married women were without property rights, husbands had so much legal power over their wives. When women worked, they were paid a fraction of what women earned” (Uddin, 2013).

The influential role of elite class and patriarchal system lead women to stay within the four walls. They remain dependent on their husbands after marriage and before that on their fathers. It is not common to expect women can go outside the home to make their lives better. The notion that men are their real protectors leads women to subordination and inferior status. Henrik Ibsen constitutes this idea by saying that:

Torvald: “You (Nora) will see I am enough to take everything upon myself” (*A Doll’s House*, p. 65).

Men are the protectors of females who make them more vulnerable creatures. This assures the dominancy of male supremacy and feudal class over the economic affairs. They create narrow space or vacuum for women to participate in economic development rather economic discrimination is on its peak in the society. The desire of resources and money is a human instinct, as Nora desires to earning resources. She reveals her feeling to a friend by saying “I need stack and stacks of money” (*A Doll’s House*, p. 50). Moreover, she says what can be the impact of having money in her life that is “carefree and happy life” (*A Doll’s House*, p. 56).

Women’s economic dependency is marked by the absence of economic rights on ground level. Velpula Kumari pronounces “ideological influence as much as monetary imbalance is the cause of women’s abuse” (Kumari, 2017). No doubt to say, it has been a rare experience in developing and under-developing countries. In the play, Nora is an audacious character against women subordination. She remains an ornament and plaything for her husband.

The social condition and inequalities do not let Nora attain what she wants to achieve in reality. Similarly, Helmer Torvald struggles to change Nora’s mindset and subdues her before the male supremacy because he himself is the part of what we call patriarchy. However, the protagonist Nora reflects her feelings:

“You all think I’m incapable of anything serious” (*A Doll’s House*, p. 71).

The notion prevalent and sprawled throughout the world that man can bear all responsibilities on their shoulders and woman is weak enough, is based on gender discrimination. This narrative truly worked like an ideology and moreover curtailed women’s liberty to have monetary benefits. Because the social structure is largely supported by the old traditions and ill desires where Ibsen’s protagonist criticizes over economic injustice:

“We have never sat down in earnest together” (*A Doll’s House*, p. 66).

Women have less economic channels and benefits hence, they remain dependent on their husbands. 19th century Norwegian women also played no significant role because of restrictions upon them. They were assigned to washing, cooking and staying at home. Men were prejudiced towards women’s monetary empowerment. It is observed that Nora wants to have liberty to remove the tag ‘incapable of anything’.

In *Sexual Politics* (1970) Kate Millet argues that the social arrangement favors men to make women economically dependent and deprived of earning rights. In a male-centric society, men are in charge of the monetary affairs at home

and outside the wall. Marxist feminism recognizes the core issue of women's empowerment and emphasizes upon a fair system of production securing women's economic rights. Rubina Saigol states:

“Marxist feminists call for a change in the system of production to eliminate social classes which are based on the exploitation of one class by another” (Saigol, 2016).

Marxist feminists have their view to change the economic discrepancies into social benefit for both the genders because the rise of capitalism and feudal class have ruined social system of production. Similarly, men got power, authority through multiple ways of earning and made society a colony. This whole intrigue of men made society vulnerable for women. Another extreme level of economic discrepancy was that women had no approval to take loan from others in the society. They had to take permission from their husbands if there would have been dire need, Ibsen mentions “No, a wife cannot borrow (money) without her husband's consent” (*A Doll's House*, p. 21).

It had been the norm of the Norwegian society that economic rights of women were squeezed because of industrialization. Females had nothing to do with the business of economy because these works were reserved for men. The reason of such excuses to make women subordinate, weak and economically dependent.

“Women's marginalization in relation to work emerged to respond to the industrial period” (Weeks, p. 65).

In the play, Nora has been a plaything for her husband. She is not treated as a member of the family. She is dependent upon her husband from hand to mouth and has no individuality to enjoy the married life. Slowly and gradually, we see change in Nora's attitude. She changes herself from submissive and subordinate to bold and courageous as she fervently says to Helmer: “I am not fit for the task. There is another task I must undertake first. I must try and educate myself” (*A Doll's House*, p. 49).

She takes a solo flight and revolts against the mighty capitalist traditions of the society without thinking about its repercussions. She wants to know her capability through educating herself and tends to eliminate labels entitled by the society like woman being irrational and incapable. Nora becomes a mouthpiece of all women belonging to the West through her inspirational attitude:

“Women are only considered unsuited to the roles reserved for men because of lacking in education” (Chanter, 2006).

Another gloomy picture of women's economic dependency has been presented by the Pakistani novelist Qaisra Shahraz. Her master piece *The Holy Woman* tries to give voice to subaltern and those who become victim of

manhood. Similarly, she represents the true tendency of Islam and its link to patriarchal society. Like Norwegian society, in Pakistan patriarchal structure is strong enough and enjoys unlimited privileges. Yasmeen Hassan opines that:

“In many other parts of society in this country (Pakistan), this is the right of the male member of the family to control the actions of their womenfolk” (Hassan, 1995).

Shahraz’s work represents a true picture of the rural setting and mindset of people from interior Sindh. Author explicitly deals with the female related issues. The setting of novel is Chagah Pur village, Tando Adam, Sindh, where caste and creed is prevalent. In Pakistan, custom and traditional rituals are stronger than the religious affairs. Almost the same situation can be found in other interior areas of Pakistan as well. Just like Shahraz, astoundingly there have also been Brahui and Baloch authors belonging to Balochistan, the least developed area of Pakistan. They try to highlight the present condition of women’s economic status whether as writers or other professionals:

Females had always been penniless and neglected. This is why, Brahui literature appears blank with women’s works (Bangulzai, 2014, p. 111).

Holistically, durable and strong male dominating society is seen where exploitation of females and threatening them is order of the day. Within a male dominant circle Izzat is more important than anything. Similarly, misuse of religion is another tool to subdue females in terms of property shares. Zari’s father Habib forces her to become Holy woman to save property:

“That life in no way can compare to the izzat, the honour and the fame that your new role will bring to you and your family” (*The Holy Woman*, p. 85).

Zari Bano’s freedom to marry Sikander is subdued, made to feel inferior and a mere puppet in the hands of male members of the family. In the modern world, directly or indirectly, men are responsible of women’s inferior status. Capitalism and patriarchy work on accumulating wealth and make people slave especially women. Male supremacy is the main obstacle in making women inferior and in providing less economic avenues to them.

Hence, women’s plight in Pakistan is not different to that of the Norwegian western society. The same religious tools are used to gain control over them. This is why so-called pseudo scholars in West and East think negative about Islam, Ayesha Jadoon pronounces that “Muslim women are the most visible sign of the exploitation and oppression” (Jadoon, 2015). This is due to not having in-depth understanding of Islamic teachings as it is observed that Zari’s father takes inhuman decision in the name of religion “Your father...wants you

to become his heiress, and our Shahzadi Ibadat, our ‘Holy Woman’, in the traditional way” (*The Holy Woman*, p. 62). This is done intentionally to save wealth and property. Therefore, Zari’s mother resists and states that “It is the twentieth century, it cannot happen” (*The Holy Woman*, p. 67).

Zari Bano struggles against her suppression. She wants to have her own business to support herself monetarily. But her father, Habib, mercilessly kills the desires and dreams of her daughter by making her *Shahzadi Ibadat*. This hostile ritual is prevalent in rural Sindh. Uzma Mazhar (2013) states:

“A large number of people in Sindh had married their daughter to the Quran. In Sindh, shabbir shah’s sister, ex-minister Murad Shah’s sister and two daughters, three daughters of Mr. Awwal Shah of Mittari daughters and sisters of Sardar Dadan and Nur Khan of the Lund tribe, nieces of sardar Ghulam of Meher tribe, and the daughter of Pir of Bharchundi sharif, were all married to Quran to prevent the share of the land going to them and thus avoid to redistribution of land” (Mazhar, 2003).

Major characters suffer from financial disparities and minor characters also fight against male dominancy. Class distinction and male dominancy unleash drastic effects on women’s lives. The poor women have to work hard to earn their livelihood. Similarly, Minor characters like, Firdaus (a washerwoman’s daughter) and Young Kaniz face the hardships and undergo similar dilemma. Statistically, the patriarchal system and feudal mindset are not willing to create space for women in economic affairs. Neither they create conducive environment for women to go outside nor let them to make contribution in monetary development. In contemporary modern world, Ali Ahmed Kharal (as cited in Hadia khan, 2019) elaborates “the reality is that any religion or any law of the land do not allow these male-made laws to sacrifice females and their basic rights in the name of so-called family honor” (Khan, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The Holy Woman and *A Doll’s House* attempt to furnish women’s economic empowerment through Marxist-Feminist ideals. Nora and Zari Bano confront with the same financial straits due to preoccupied male ideology. Similarly, both the protagonists portray a true picture of women’s economic crisis and raise awareness for gaining rights. Women’s economic empowerment, whether in West or East, are left with little room to use their abilities on socio-economic grounds due to male dominancy in society. Moreover, in undertaken theoretical framework, it is mainly observed that there are constraints, confrontations and complications between society and religion. This study highlights the sameness in terms of women’s empowerment in different societies and emphasizes that women’s participation is indispensable for socio-economic progress and

development. It also provides with the insight that patriarchy is the main cause to generate economic constraints for women.

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