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Abstract: *This paper explores the theme of spatial politics and domestic entrapment in Henrik Ibsen's* A Doll's House. *Through the symbolic stage setting and character dynamics of the Helmer household, Ibsen presents a critique of women's confinement. Nora lives in a socio-politically curated domestic space, which reflects patriarchal control. Her eventual rebellion, symbolized by her exit slamming of the gate marks her realization of the heterotopic space in which she does not belong to.*

Keywords: confinement, home, entrapment, space, heterotopia

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Nora's Escape from Spatial Politics and Domestic Entrapment in *A Doll's House*

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Introduction

Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* has ensured a significant place in world literature for its dealing with the social issues of domestic entrapment, societal expectations and gender roles in the late nineteenth century. The setting plays a crucial role in highlighting these themes, particularly through the Helmer household, which serves as both a comfortable home and a restrictive environment for Nora. This setting analysis offers a lens to understand the character's motivations and the societal constraints they navigate. This paper argues that Ibsen's use of domestic space not only reflects but actively enforces patriarchal control over Nora, with her rebellion representing a radical act of spatial and psychological emancipation.

Literature Review

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, particularly within feminist literary criticism and realist theatre studies. Scholars have long noted in the play the criticism of patriarchal gender roles and its innovative use of domestic space as both setting and symbol. Symbols like the macaroons, Nora's tarantella dance, the Christmas tree, dolls etc have been analysed by different critics. Both macaroons and Nora's tarantella dance are related to Nora's rebellious nature. The symbol of the doll has also been viewed as the objectification of Nora by the patriarchal society.

Contemporary scholarship has also engaged with spatial theory in relation to *A Doll's House*. Othman (2024) argues that the Helmer household serves as a controlled space, designed to sustain male authority while marginalizing female autonomy. This reading aligns with Henri Lefebvre's theory of social production of space, which posits that domestic settings are not passive backdrops but active sites of social control. Additionally, Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* provides a psychoanalytic framework for interpreting how domestic spaces shape human consciousness, a perspective relevant to understanding Nora's psychological confinement.

Moreover, the play's feminist implications have been enriched by Simone de Beauvoir's theoretical contributions in *The Second Sex*, where she identifies the domestic sphere as a patriarchal construct confining women to immanence. This concept is particularly useful for analyzing Nora's struggle within the Helmer household, as she transitions from a passive object of male desire to an autonomous subject.

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While existing studies have extensively discussed feminism and symbolism in *A Doll's House*, fewer have explicitly combined Lefebvre's spatial theory with de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism to interrogate the domestic space as a site of both physical and ideological entrapment. This paper seeks to bridge that gap by examining how the spatial organization of the Helmer household functions as a heterotopia—a concept derived from Michel Foucault—and how Nora's eventual departure represents a subversion of patriarchal spatial politics.

Domestic Space and Spatial Symbolism

In *A Doll's House* Ibsen portrays the Helmer's house as a cage, which imprisons Nora by employing static household space. All the scenes in the play take place in Helmer's house. The stage props exhibit the imagery of a doll captured in its house, which symbolically delineates Nora's physical and emotional entrapment in their house. The intimate spaces reflect her secretive actions, such as sneaking macaroons and engaging in manipulative dialogues with Krogstad, showcasing her struggle for self-expression. Additionally, Torvald's office symbolizes his authority and the patriarchal rules. Helmer's house demonstrates the economic stability of a middle-class family. Ibsen uses the domestic space as a metaphor for Nora's entrapment and to create an illusion of stability. The spatial layout of the Helmer house creates a psychological prison for Nora and her final act of leaving the house is a symbolic gesture of liberation.

The sitting area where all the scenes take place including Nora's secret eating of macaroons, her verbal exchanges with Krogstad and her preparation of the costume and practices for the tarantella dance for a Christmas ball is a metaphorical representation of patriarchal suppression of Nora's desire. She is psychologically and emotionally manipulated and oppressed in the closed space of the room.

Torvald's inner sanctum is a forbidden world for Nora where she can never enter. It is the place where many autocratic decisions are taken. The letter of Krogstad's dismissal is written from this room. Nora's debarment from this room suggests that she can never interfere in Torvald's decision and the outside world. Again, Torvald's study occupies a pivotal but curiously inaccessible position in the domestic setting. Though adjacent to the living room, it remains a space Nora never enters. Throughout the play, Nora listens at its door, knocks upon it, and responds to Torvald's summons from within, but she is never permitted to cross its threshold. This spatial exclusion is not incidental. In the bourgeois household of the nineteenth century, the study functioned as a masculine enclave: a place where financial, legal, and moral authority resided. It was a domestic extension of the public sphere, from which women were systematically barred.

Torvald's study, therefore, is more than a room — it is a materialization of patriarchal authority. It is where decisions about Nora's life are made, where Krogstad's fateful letter is read, and where economic and social power is exercised. Nora's absence from this space is emblematic of her exclusion

from decision-making structures that govern her own existence. Ibsen uses the physical barrier of the study door to reflect the ideological and legal constraints that confine Nora within prescribed social roles.

In contrast to the study, the living room functions as a performative space, where Nora fulfils her roles as wife, mother, and entertainer. It is here that she decorates the Christmas tree, indulges in playful banter with Torvald, and hosts guests. This space, while central to the household's social life, is devoid of actual power. It is a stage upon which Nora enacts the roles assigned to her by a patriarchal society. The spatial arrangement of *A Doll's House* generates dramatic tension that is both literal and symbolic. The audience is acutely aware that critical decisions about Nora's future are being made in a space she cannot access. The letter that threatens to expose her secret lies within a study she cannot enter. Nora's only interactions with the study are mediated through eavesdropping, pleading at its door, or being summoned by Torvald. This architectural exclusion mirrors the legal and social disenfranchisement faced by women in Ibsen's society. Nora's exclusion from the study and confinement to the living room reflect the social structures that restrict women to roles of performance while denying them participation in power.

To create a suitable 'haunting ground' for his play, Ibsen makes his set come alive. At the set, we first see two doors. One leads to Torvald's study room which represents security, authority and patriarchal power. Torvald's invisible presence behind that door is felt as archetypal dominance. The other is the main door. Ibsen presents the front door as a symbol of the way to the outside world, the world of reality and activity. It is that kind of activity which the patriarchal society considers the real work. Interestingly, people who come through the door are persons who have experienced the reality of the world. The hardship of life is only allowed outside. Krogstad, Dr. Rank, and Mrs. Linde are such persons considered by socially constructed rules. On the contrary, Nora's sacrifice for her husband is not considered 'real work' as it is done in the domestic space. However, Nora does not use the main door unless it is for small household care. Once she comes back from her Christmas shopping, she never leaves her home, the only way to see the world beyond her house is using the window, but it is only a limited view of the world. The window stands as a metaphor for Nora's view of the world, like the window, it is restricted and narrow. So, she knows "so little of the burdens and hardships" (Ibsen 14).

Eventually, she realizes she has been treated just like a doll. She recognizes her house as a doll's house a fantasm—a world of her imagination. The play shows Nora's recognition of the main door as the gateway to freedom. Nora's departure from her house—actually Helmer's house— with the sound of the front door being slammed shatters the audience's and Helmer's hope that she might adapt to her husband's house back, metaphorically to her doll house. The slamming of the door ensures the audience that Nora is free from her confinement.

The following sections will discuss some symbols and images indirectly related to space. The doll image characterises Nora's living space. She buys dolls for her daughter and refers to her children as "little dollies". This suggests she is raising her daughters to lead a similar life of her own. However, until the end of the play, the metaphor is not explicitly made clear when Nora tells Torvald that both he and her father treated her like a doll and mentions this as one of the reasons for her being disillusioned with her life and her relationship with him. Roland Barthes observes that toys "are essentially a microcosm of the adult world" (57). Though Barthes's observation is based on French people, it is, in fact, a universal propensity of the parents to adapt their children to the adult world through the toys they are given. Accordingly, female children are given dolls and replications of household objects whereas male ones are given toys to adapt to the external world. The image of the doll is very significant in this context as Nora is supposed to be the doll who has no control over the world she is in. The doll image inforces Nora to live in a space curated by the sociopolitical norms of patriarchal society. The image of the doll proposes her fixity to her world.

Another significant symbol, though it does not directly fall under the category of spatial imagery, is obviously the skylark, which Torvald uses as Nora's nickname. The name of the living bird, just like the doll image, characterises Nora's space of living. As the nest is to the skylark, so is the Helmer house to Nora. However, the term, 'nest' is not compared to the house Nora lives in, nor is it ever mentioned in the play. So, it is not a metaphor for intimacy, comfort, and protection, as Bachelard points out in his book. Rather the skylark's nest is a symbol doubly suppressed in the play. The nest is alluded to as the nest of the skylark that William Wordsworth wrote his poem about. It is the nest where the skylark's 'cares abound' (line 2). So, the nest is simply a metaphor for home.

However, apparently, the image of the skylark relates to Nora's sweetness—echoed by another nickname, songbird—the archetypal quality of a girl, a daughter, and a wife. The sweetness suppresses the boldness and revolt that Nora nurtures in her mind—momentarily revealed in her tarantella dance. While the image is used as a nickname for Nora the other quality of the bird is forgotten: the skylark is not only a songbird but also a flying bird which can fly beyond visibility. Thus we find a transition in Nora from a songbird to a flying bird. Metaphorically it is a transition from Wordsworthian skylark to Shelleyean skylark. Wordsworth's skylark is a bird of mundane reality of socially constructed ideas of home and care—one's bonding with household things including the children. On the contrary, Shelley's skylark is not a bird of flesh and blood, it is a bird of revolutionary ideas rejecting mundane care and responsibility. Unlike Wordsworth's skylark, Shelley's bird has no earthly home. In *A Doll's House*, Nora's initial stage, before her confrontation with Torvald, can be seen as aligned with Wordsworth's skylark. She is comfortable in her role but also feels a sense of dissatisfaction as she finds herself thrown into the house without any choice of her own. Eventually, she identifies herself with Shelley's skylark.

She wants to free herself from the constraints of her house. The final scene where she leaves Torvald, represents her embrace of Shelley's skylark. She embraces the freedom to define herself.

Nora's Confrontation with the Spatial Politics

In the play, Ibsen uses the metaphor of a doll to explicate Nora's entrapment within the household space. Though Nora is a caring mother and wife, always sacrificing herself for the sake of children and Torvald, she cannot be authoritative in the house—she is powerless both in external affairs and in household decisions. Her power is delimited to decorating the rooms, selecting the colours of the window screens etc. Otherwise, she is treated like a doll. Thus her individuality is ignored and her sacrifice is overlooked.

Again, the use of the word "doll" is significant for its use in the title of the play, *A Doll's House*. It suggests the objectification of Nora who is the doll here. However, the possessive noun suggests Nora's ownership of the house but, in reality, she is not. Hence, some critics prefer the title "A Doll House" (Ibsen xvii) to the traditional one because it seems to them more practical as both Torvald and Nora are part of that objectification. The play focuses on the social problems of contemporary society, not a personal problem. Women treated like dolls is a social problem, not an exceptional case in Helmer's family. Torvald is controlled by the traditional idea of society. His patriarchal notion cannot let him understand the true meaning of marriage. Nora realizes the fact and says to Torvald:

> I've been your doll-wife here, just as at home I was Papa's doll-child. And the children have been my dolls in their turn. I liked it when you came and played with me, just as they liked it when I came and played with them. That's what our marriage has been. (82)

Earlier, Nora does not realise the meaning of marriage that is why she is afraid of being revealed. In her conversation with Mrs Linde, she expresses her fear that her sacrifice for Torvald will ruin their relationship. Factually, Torvald also cannot realise the meaning of marriage. He is also a part of the doll house they live in. It is just a playroom they are enjoying: Torvald is enjoying the power of dominion and decision-making; Nora is enjoying playing the role of a submissive wife.

Social Production of Nora's Space

The play's settings and characters' experiences shape and are shaped by their understanding of space. Henry Lefebvre's framework of social production of space can illuminate how the play explores the restrictive and oppressive nature of domestic spaces and the societal expectations that define them. This theory argues that space is not a neutral backdrop but a social product shaped by societal practices, representations and the spatial imagination. This theory articulated in his book *The Production of Space*, emphasizes the dynamic relationship between society and space, highlighting how social relations and

spatial forms are inter-related. The setting of *A Doll's House* is not merely a backdrop but a social construct that reflects societal power structures. The play's spatial organization, from the cosy parlour to the symbolic doors, embodies a world where women are confined and controlled within a patriarchal framework.

Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* gives explanations of different spaces used in this play. Bachelard interpretation of the physical space elucidates an individual's relationship with the surrounding space. For Bachelard, a house is a space for shelter, dreams, memory, and safety. This idea gives a comprehensibility of Nora's domestic space. At the very beginning of the play, Ibsen presents Nora with a dream-like obsession. Interestingly, she finds relief in being at home because it is the space for her comfort, safety, and shelter. It has already been pointed out that Torvald's office is the space of authority. Several times, Nora is seen to be standing at the door of this room but she never enters the room. The consistent absence of Nora entering Torvald's study is a deliberate choice by Ibsen. The study symbolizes Torvald's private domain and authority within the household. Nora's exclusion from this space underscores the power imbalance in their relationship and highlights the limitations placed on her autonomy.

Nora's Denial of Gender Roles

The play critiques the patriarchal structures that confine women to subservient roles within the domestic sphere. Nora's journey exemplifies the struggle against the oppressive gender roles prescribed by society. The play's portrayal of power dynamics within the Helmer household reveals how patriarchy manifests itself in personal relationships, highlighting the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by women while seeking autonomy. According to Simone de Beauvoir, women have been historically defined as the Other, given as the passive and immanent counterpart to man's active and subjective roles. Nora's domestic space in the Helmer house is the symbolic space of her confinement, which is, in reality, a patriarchal structure that treats Nora as property. Women are expected to play the roles of a mother and a wife in the house which has traditionally been imposed upon them as natural. This patriarchal structure has reduced them to objects, denying them any authority in it.

Freedom, according to Simone de Beauvoir, is an escape from the expected gender roles and seeking identity beyond the given domestic space. The household of Helmer functions as the domestic sphere designed to confine Nora in her gender identities as a mother and a wife—her duties are confined to the home, her financial authority is denied, and her identity is subsumed under the roles of wife and mother. As de Beauvoir opines, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (330). This becoming of a woman is a socio-political process from the upbringing of a girl-child to the domestic space she is given.

Judith Butler argues that there's no essential identity or "true gender" but one's performance itself produces the illusion of a stable gender identity. Nora performs the role of the obedient, cheerful, and flirtatious wife. Nora is treated as a doll in her paternal house and the Helmer house, a little skylark, the songbird, and featherbrain. She accepts all these and performs domestic roles. Her actions reinforce her femininity as defined by her husband and culture. But finally, she frees herself with an act of self-liberation, rejecting the domestic confinement and socially constructed gender identity.

Heterotopia—the Mirrored Space

In the play, Nora's decoration of the house, which is her given space, showcases her effort to create an ideal space for her—a utopia. However, the space she tries to create is not a utopia rather it is a heterotopia—an idea given by Michel Foucault in a lecture delivered in 1967 and posthumously published by *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* in 1984. According to Foucault, utopias are not realistic places rather they relate to the "direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down…" (3). On the contrary, Foucault continues,

> There are also […] counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (3-4)

The Helmer house is a represented image of the utopia that Nora tries to create for her family and herself—where everyone seems to be happy and satisfied. It is a mirror where she seems to belong there but, in reality, she does not. Again, Nora also finds herself in Kristina—she identifies herself with her. When she comes to know about the struggle that Kristina had to go through, she reveals her own secret of borrowing money and repaying the money in instalments. Despite her struggle, Nora realizes, in the end, that her position is worse than that of Mrs Linde. So, both spaces (the Helmer house and her image in Mrs Linde) are unreal and virtual. On the other way round, Torvald helps her to recognize that mirror, telling the truth that she does not belong there. Thus, Torvald, Mrs Linde, and the house are heterotopic spaces.

In a way, Nora, from the very beginning of the play, is aware of the heterotopic spaces that she creates and lives in. She knows very well that Torvald would not have allowed her to borrow money from others. When Mrs Linde asks her if she has told her husband, Nora replies, "Torvald has his pride—most men have—he'd be terribly hurt and humiliated if he thought he owned anything to me. It'd spoil everything between us, and our lovely happy home would never be the same again" (17). Nora

knows if the secret is revealed the happy space reflecting her middle-class utopia will be shattered down. Yet she wants to see herself there secure, happy, and satisfied. She creates her own heterotopic space out of the Helmer household.

In the final scene, the heterotopic mirror breaks down and Nora begins to discover her absence there. She comes back to her real space in the world and reconstitutes herself where she is. So, she must leave the space where she does not exist. Nora walks out of her family, slamming the door.

Conclusion

Nora is a victim of a patriarchal society. She has been treated by her husband according to male chauvinism. Nora is well efficient in finding her own identity and recognition but the spatial politics entraps Nora in her domestic world. However, she realizes that the entrapment is socially constructed. It is a mirrored space where she tries to live in. So she rebels against this politics; she tries to prove that women can be equal to men and autonomous in their own identities. Nora's final departure from the Helmer House is the creation of a new space.

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