

Nora, Damini and Stella: A Comparative Study of Female Predicaments

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Abstract

Much has been talked in literature about femininity and feminism. In a patriarchal society, females are expected to be enriched with feminine qualities; this is a universal urge of majority of people all over the world. As literature reflects life, in many literary pieces we notice that most of the time, it is the womankind who are generally the victims of social injustice, man made rules, fundamentalism and malpractices. Henrik Ibsen's Nora in A Doll's House (1879), Damini in Rabindranath Tagore's Quartet (1916) and Stella in Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) are the three female characters from three different literary pieces whom we would like to discuss here with a view to demonstrating their actions under certain circumstances that ultimately prove that women's suffering is universal, no matter time, race and geographical boundaries. When we introduce Nora, Damini and Stella, we find that Nora's story is told against European background in the 1870s, Damini is from Indian setting before the First World War and Stella is from post World War II American society. These three women are different individuals but their position in their own society does not vary too much. My paper aims at illustrating how these three married ladies have to undergo domestic troubles when they are dependent on their male-counterparts in patriarchal society; also it highlights their level of self-realization arisen from their contextual surroundings.

Keywords: Married Women, Patriarchal society, Self- realization, Universal sufferings

Introduction

Henrik Ibsen's Nora, Rabindranath Tagore's Damini and Tennessee Williams' Stella are three women characters from three different literary pieces (respectively A Doll's House, Quartet, A Streetcar Named Desire) from Europe, India and America. Though their life-styles are different from each-other in their own socio-political contexts, the predicaments and sufferings they have to undergo are almost identical as they are the representatives of womenfolk in general. There are differences in their actions, both verbal and physical but under certain circumstances some of them have to take dauntless decisions as we observe in the case of Nora and Damini. Nora's transformation from a doll to a dynamic human attributed with self-awakening and courage has arisen from the stereotyped gender roles played by the mainstream male members of society. As a widow, Damini is not supposed to love someone. Women are just seen as 'women'- the better-half of man, the source of

Nora, Damini and Stella: A Comparative Study of Female Predicaments

hospitality, entertainment and nursing, some kind of commodity or show-piece to adorn men's house, the mother attributed with motherliness, home manager of household duties (my own definition) Stella is such a typical, docile wife of Stanley in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Both Nora in *A Doll's House* and Damini in *Quartet* have played all these roles as long as they were identified as Mrs. Helmer (Nora as wife of Helmer) or Mrs. Shibtosh. (Damini as wife of Shibtosh) But at a certain point they have to obviate their identity as some gentleman's wife because situations made them do so. The societies wherein they have been living for years are liable to condemn them but their ultimate actions have paved the way to view themselves as human beings attributed with deep longing for love, freedom, self-curiosity, self-security.

Nora is the central character in Henrik Ibsen's famous play *A Doll's House*, published in the year 1879. It was the time when even in Europe, the idea of a married woman deciding to leave her family and refusing to render unquestioning obedience to her husband was somehow bizarre and shocking. The play had a message to the contemporary European society which sought to awaken a sense of individual responsibility among women. Nora's action apparently seems emotional, impulsive; but it is more beyond gross emotion- it is the exposition of her strong feelings with reference to how she has been humiliated in her husband's house. At the same time we should not forget that both Nora and her husband are the productions of patriarchal society that teaches men to be commanding, authoritative on women. We can now talk about how Nora is trained to play the role of a doll in her husband's house.

Nora is the beloved, adored wife of Helmer, an admirable man, rigidly honest, of high moral ideals, and passionately devoted to his wife and children- as Nora believes him to be. Nora is just the doll wife of Helmer; she is always bothered to avoid things that Helmer dislikes. As Helmer wants Nora should not eat macaroons, Nora dare not take it though her strong appetite for macaroons sometimes let her taste it stealthily. Nora, too, considers herself fortunate. Indeed, she worships her husband, believes in him implicitly, and is sure that if ever her safety should be menaced, Helmer, her idol, her god, would perform the miracle. When her husband's life is threatened, it is a self-propelling duty for Nora to forge her father's name to a note and borrow an amount of money on it, in order to take her sick husband to Italy. She works hard, and saves every penny of her pin-money to pay back the amount she borrowed on the forged check.

Nora is light-hearted and jovial, apparently without profundity, depth of her mind. Down deep in the consciousness of Nora there evidently slumbers personality and character, which could come into full bloom only through a great miracle--not the kind she hopes for, but a miracle just the same. Even when Nora is confronted with this repulsive threat, she does not fear for herself, only for Helmer, who has such an aversion to debts, and who loves her so devotedly that for her sake he would take the blame upon himself. Nora, who cannot understand why a daughter has no right to spare her dying father's anxiety, or why a wife has no right to save her husband's life, is surely not aware of the true character of her idol. But sequentially the curtain disappears.

Nora, Damini and Stella: A Comparative Study of Female Predicaments

And then in the last Act, the final blow comes. For forty-eight hours, Nora battles for her ideal, never apprehending Helmer for a moment. The end comes, and with it the doll's house tumbles down, and Nora discards her doll's dress--she sheds her skin, as it were. It is then that she realizes how much she has been wronged, that she is only a plaything, a doll to Helmer. In her disillusionment she says:

You have never loved me. You only thought it amusing to be in love with me.
Helmer. Why, Nora, what a thing to say!

Nora. Yes, it is so, Torvald. While I was at home with father he used to tell me all his opinions and I held the same opinions. If I had others I concealed them, because he would not have liked it. He used to call me his doll child, and play with me as I played with my dolls. Then I came to live in your house-- . . . I mean I passed from father's hands into yours. You settled everything according to your taste; and I got the same tastes as you; or I pretended to-- I don't know which--both ways perhaps. When I look back on it now, I seem to have been living here like a beggar, from hand to mouth. I lived by performing tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so. You and father have done me a great wrong. It's your fault that my life has been wasted. . .

Helmer. It's exasperating! Can you forsake your holiest duties in this way?

Nora. What do you call my holiest duties?

Helmer. Do you ask me that? Your duties to your husband and children.

Nora. I have other duties equally sacred.

Helmer. Impossible! What duties do you mean?

Nora. My duties toward myself.

Helmer. Before all else you are a wife and a mother.

Nora. That I no longer believe. I think that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are--or, at least, I will try to become one. I know that most people agree with you, Torvald, and that they say so in books... I must think things out for myself and try to get clear about them. . . . I had been living here these eight years with a strange man, and had borne him three children--Oh! I can't bear to think of it--I could tear myself to pieces!. . . I can't spend the night in a strange man's house. (Ibsen, 1961, pp.100-101)

In real life there is nothing more degrading to woman than to live with a stranger, and bear him children. Yet, the lie of the marriage institution in the Victorian period decrees that she shall continue doing so, and the social conception of duty insists that for the sake of that lie she needs being nothing else than a toy, a doll, a nullity.

Nora has been living for eight years in Helmer's house but she has no power in deciding anything, rather, it is Helmer who is the master and decision-maker in his house. It is because of her feeble personality that she has become a doll in Helmer's hand and in her 'Papa's house' which she realizes at the end of the play. With a view to saving her husband's life, Nora forges her dead father's signature. On the other hand, Nora's friend Mrs. Linden is a woman of strong personality who gives priority in looking after her sick mother and helpless brothers; she knows what will make her happy and she acts accordingly. At the end of the play, we see Mrs. Linden and Krogstaad are planning to tie the marriage-knot whereas Nora

456

Nora, Damini and Stella: A Comparative Study of Female Predicaments

and Helmer are going to be separated- Nora ridiculing her marriage bond. What Nora lacks are possessed by Mrs. Linden- now it is Nora's turn to know what she indeed wants. When Nora closes behind her the door of her doll's house, she opens wide the entrance of life to be viewed by a woman as a human being, and proclaims the firebrand message that true independence and communion make a fair knot between man and woman.

Now we can have a glimpse on Tagore's Damini. Damini is the protagonist in Tagore's novella, *Chaturanga*, published in the year 1916, a crucial time in the Indian sub-continent and already the year 1828 has traditionally been regarded as demarcating the beginning of a new era in the history of British India.¹ In the novella, Damini is a widow whom the translator (Rabindranath Tagore's Bangla novella *Chaturanga*, translated and titled as *Quartet* by Kaiser Haq) describes: "In Damini the Universal Feminine assumes another form. She has no truck with death, she is the celebrant of vital force." (Tagore, 1993, p.30) She would often rebel against the practices of Swamiji whom her husband Shibtoosh, as a devotee had worshipped in his lifetime. The text depicts Damini as "Damini didn't dress like a widow; then she would pointedly ignore the guru's instructions;" (Tagore, 1993, p.33) Damini nurtures a deep love for Sachish, our saint-like protagonist who has found his spiritual destination in mysticism. Time and again Damini attempts to disclose her heart to Sachish but he is indifferent. It is quite unusual, unimaginable to see a typical widow fall in love with a man in Damini's society. Damini dare do it as she is not stereo-typed; even she happily marries Sribilash when she finds nowhere to go. Society's reaction about her action goes such:

The aunt wouldn't let Damini live with her. The city was apparently buzzing with condemnation of us. Shortly after our desertion of the guru's party the puja special of the weeklies came out; so the chopping blocks were ready for us, and there was no dearth of bloodshed. The scripture forbid the sacrifice of female animals, but in the case of human beings sacrificing females gives the greatest satisfaction. Though Damini's name was not explicitly mentioned in the papers, care was taken to ensure that there would be no doubt about the target of the slander. (Tagore, 1993, p.72)

Both Ibsen and Tagore portray their heroines as unconventional, free-spirited personas who dare challenge the existing norms and values. As matters the portrayal of Damini Alokaranjan Dasgupta comments:

His (Sachish) female counterpart Damini, too, is no longer the personification of the archetypal perfection, life-affirming principle, as Tagore wanted her to be. This woman wriggles out of the controlling tentacles of her creator, a sentinel of ethos or rectitude in his talks on religion, philosophy and society. She stands in a no-man's land and moves thus away

¹ "Indian reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) advocated abolition of the sati system (the custom of burning widows alive with the dead bodies of their husbands). In Regulation of XVII of December 1829, Bentinck declared sati illegal". Biplab Pal, *Clash of Civilization: Lesson from Lord Bentinck (1829)*, Published on 03 April, 2006 http://www.muktomona.com/Articles/biplab_pal/bentink.htm

Nora, Damini and Stella: A Comparative Study of Female Predicaments

from the Tagorean centre of auspicious gravitation: 'Where there is no reply to any answer or call on such a boundless and pale-white ground, Damini stood like one struck. here everything has been wiped off to reach the primal whiteness. Only a big NO languished near her feet'. Only then we perceive how unqualified Romain Rolland's observation is when he says that: 'Tagore recoiled from everything that stood for NO'²

Damini can exercise her will power. All through the story she remained a dynamic character-rebellious, expressive, vocal, tricky, loving, demanding. She dies at the end but her death was a happy one when she says Sribilash, " My longings are still with me. I go with the prayer that I may find you again in my next life." (trans. Haq, 1993, 78)

Nora, too, exercises her will power but that we do not notice till the end of the play. In Nora's case, we notice a complete transformation in her; she is a passive character in the first place whose eating practice is also guided by Helmer but there is an abrupt high-level of development in her character at the end of the play. Symbolically her 'Tarantella' dance helps her gather her spiritual strength. Now she becomes verbally and physically articulated. Her departure is the most crucial step to know herself, to let her exercise what her heart wants.

Our third woman character is Stella from A Streetcar Named Desire, an American play. Stella in Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) is a typical housewife, socially and economically dependent on Stanley- a raw and unpolished man, an authoritative husband who frequently assaults his wife when his temperament is out of control. This lady is deeply in love with Stanley; moreover she knows that in the society, she belongs to nowhere without the husband. She is very practical when she tries to make her sister Blanche understand that she is physically and economically dependent on Stanley and it is her ardent love for her husband that she overlooks his faults. The society Blanche and Stella inhabit is a society wherein women are socially, economically and physically dependent on their male counterparts and consequently females are the victims of all types of injustice as we observe in the case of both Blanche and Stella.

When Stanley seduces Blanche in Scene Ten, Stella remains totally inactive after knowing this; she even does not want to investigate the truth. Also, she does not prevent Stanley to send away her dearest sister in the lobotomy only because her disobedience of Stanley would degrade her position as a loving as well as submissive wife. The painful paradox underlies the ending scene of this play when Blanche is forcibly taken to the lobotomy, and Stella, unable to raise any protest, allows her husband to make love to her:

Stella: Please, Blanche

Blanche: Why are you looking at me like that? Is something wrong with you?

Eunice: You look wonderful, Blanche. Don't she look wonderful?

Stella: Yes

Eunice: I understand you are going on a trip.

Stella: Yes, Blanche is. She's going on a vacation.

² Alokeranjan Dasgupta, "My Tagore"- Text of a Lecture delivered at the Tagore Symposium at Darmstad , on the occasion of the Indian Festival in Germany, 1993.
www.parabaas.com/rabindranath/articles/RT-authors.htm

Nora, Damini and Stella: A Comparative Study of Female Predicaments

Eunice: I'm green with envy.

Blanche: Help me, help me get dressed!

Stella[handing her dress]: Is this what you?

Blanche: Yes, it will do! I'm anxious to get out of here- this place is a trap!

(Williams, 1984, Scene 11, p.84)

Tennessee's Stella falls far short if we compare her with Ibsen's Nora and Tagore's Damini. She is completely a passive but a very practical character. She believes in reality, practicality unlike her sister Blanche who loves to live in the world of dream. Blanche is defeated due to Stanley's villainous scheme but several times she attempted to rebel; even she tries to persuade Stella to leave Stanley but Stella just ignores.

Stella's surrender to Stanley is almost total; she has accepted his world and his values. We need to be convinced of her devotion to her husband if we are to accept as believable her complicity in Blanche's committal. Given that Stella cannot imagine life without Stanley, her readiness to sacrifice her sister becomes inevitable. She will carry her guilt as a price to be paid for the preservation of her marriage. (Sambrook, 1998, p.37)

In her paper "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" delivered at the Copeland Colloquium, Amerst College, April 1980, Audre Lorde says:

But our future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality. As women, we must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change. Now we must recognize differences among women who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each others' difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles. The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us. The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recrimination, lamentation, and suspicion.³

A widespread concept of women is nicely illustrated in Alfred Lord Tennyson's famous poem "Locksley Hall":

'Weakness to be worth with weakness! woman's pleasure, woman's pain-,
Nature made them blinder motions bounded in a shallower brain -
Woman is the lesser man, and all thy passions, matched with mine,
Are as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine-

(Tennyson, "Locksley Hall" ll.149-153, p.1078)

³Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" delivered at the Copeland Colloquium, Amerst College, April 1980, Reproduced in: *Sister Outsider* Crossing Press, California 1984. Retrieved from: www.clc.wvu.edu

Nora, Damini and Stella: A Comparative Study of Female Predicaments

Our Nora and Damini are supposed to be like this. But their social constructions unfortunately undergo a tsunami when they cease to play the archetypal role of femininity ascribed by the stereo-typed gender roles in society by refusing to be docile and submissive to their male partners. Both these women undertake courageous missions to explore themselves; Nora even forestalls her motherliness. Damini is not a mother and we cannot guess what she would do if she had children. Here Damini is more benefited, as she need not consider her surroundings as a mother. Nora deserves more admiration when she tells Helmer that she is no good to play the role of a mother as she is a cheat. Her final action is the illustration of her awakening consciousness which would further lead her to a long way's journey through life. Stella chooses to live with Stanley as she is a compromising wife; her love for Stanley outlasts anything. Damini dies at the end of the play with satisfaction and gratitude for Sribilash but why she is not let to live (by the playwright) is an unanswered question. If Damini would not die at the end and if she could live longer, that would somehow give us an optimistic view that a woman can live happily in conjugal life. At the end, we cannot but admit that Nora, Damini and Stella in *A Doll's House*, *Quartet* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* represent the universal predicaments of suffering women..

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