

THE WORLD OR I ?

Ibsen's NORA

"Before all else, you are a wife and mother."

"I don't believe that any more. I believe that before all else, I am a reasonable human being just as you are... I know quite well that most people would say you are right, and that views of that kind are to be found in books, but I can no longer be content with what most people say or with what is found in books. I must think over things for myself and get to understand them."

How recent? From Ibsen's *Dolls' House* first produced in 1979 and performed last month in Delhi by *Ruchika*. A play about the woman who literally bursts out of her 19th century shell, shattering the myth of the good housewife and ideal mother. The play's heroine Nora finds that mental development is impossible if she is to play these roles : "I must stand quite alone if I am to understand myself and everything around me."

Her husband is aghast at this woman he has been living with but has never seen before – because he has never looked at her. He has looked only at the image of her in his own mind. He thought she was a fragile doll, totally dependent on him – his "little squirrel", his "gay lark". Through eight years of marriage she acted this myth of the pretty, extravagant dollwife, while all the time, she was struggling, working, sacrificing, saving every penny to pay off the debt she had secretly incurred when money was needed to save Torvald's life.

When the secret is disclosed, Torvald reacts with violence: "Miserable creature, do you understand what you have done?" "I am just beginning to understand", Nora replies quietly. She listens, silent, as Torvald calls her a liar, a criminal, and forbids her to go near the children.

Just then, a letter arrives for her from the blackmailer. Torvald grabs it, reads. "Nora, I am saved", he cries. The blackmailer has relented. Overjoyed, Torvald immediately assures Nora of his forgiveness "Do you suppose that you are any the less dear to me, because you don't understand how to act on your own responsibility? No, no, only lean on me. I will advise and direct you. I should not be a man if this womanly helplessness did not give you a double attractiveness in my eyes... you have no idea what a true man's heart is like, Nora. There is something so indescribably sweet and satisfying to a man in the knowledge that he has forgiven his wife... she has, in a way, become both wife and child to him. So you shall be for me after this, my little scared, helpless darling... I will serve as will and conscience to you... I have broad wings to shelter you under."

But Nora is no longer there to be sheltered. She is in the bedroom changing her clothes. "What are you doing?" he

asks. "Taking off my fancy dress", she answers.

Torvald's behaviour at this crisis had helped her realize that their relationship has no basis, except that he has treated her as a beautiful possession: "I was transferred from Papa's hands to yours... I have lived here like a poor woman, from hand to mouth... You played with me like a doll, as I played with the children like my dolls... You and Papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life."

She has sacrificed her whole existence to be a wife, but for Torvald his status and reputation in society are far more important: "I would gladly work night and day for you, Nora... But no man would sacrifice his honour for the one he loves."

"It is a thing hundreds of thousands of women have done."

For Nora now, marriage is no longer enough – not even a "happy" marriage or a "good" man to depend on. "It gives me great pain, Torvald, for you have always been so kind to me, but I cannot help it. I do not love you any more."

She now needs independence, economic and emotional, before she can love, because love presupposes equality. But Nora cannot develop the equal relationships she wants with friends, husbands, servants, because the family, and world for business, the society she moves in, all define the relationships of human beings to each other as unequal, especially, the relationship of a woman to a man. Her male friends, when she needs their help, want to offer themselves as lovers, substitute-husbands. Nora's dissatisfaction is not just with the family but with religion, with law, the entire social system: "I am going to see if I can make out who is right, the world or I."

The Dolls' House was written when Europe was in ferment around the turn of the century. Women were beginning to demand the right to divorce, the right to vote, the right to work. The New Woman was emerging. Ibsen shows how the human being has outgrown the institution, therefore the need for new institutions, new relationships.

Ruchika's production in Delhi last month, brought out well the contradiction – Nora's intelligence beneath the silliness, maturity beneath the girlishness, sadness beneath the gaiety. However, the play would be more meaningful in adapted and translated versions. It has been successfully performed in Marathi and Bengali. The Bengali version of Nora wiping the *sindur* from her forehead, evoked a concerted gasp from the audience.

Women's groups could use this play as a starting point for discussion. After all, Nora's dilemma is ours. Do we not live in different ways the myth of our own childishness and inferiority? Is it not still difficult to acknowledge that or most sacred duties are not imposed ones, that in one's duties to oneself, one must learn to say, "I cannot consider what people will say, I only know that it is necessary for me."? And is not her hope ours: "The most wonderful thing of all would have to happen... (before she can live with Torvald) We both would have to transform ourselves completely..."

- *Manini Das*