



## Journal of Communication and Cultural Trends (JCCT)

Volume 2 Issue 1, Spring 2020

ISSN<sub>(P)</sub>: 2706-9141 ISSN<sub>(E)</sub>: 2706-915X

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jcct>

Issue DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jcct.21>

Homepage: <https://journals.umt.edu.pk/index.php/jcct/Home>

Journal QR Code:



Article:

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Online Published:

Spring 2020

Article DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.32350/jcct.21.02>

Article QR Code:



To Cite Article:

Munair, H., (2020). Language shapes socially constructed gender roles: Ibsen's 'a doll's house' in focus. *Journal of Communication and Cultural Trends*, 2(1), 19–29.

[Crossref](#)



A publication of the  
Institute of Communication and Cultural Studies  
University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

## Language Shapes Socially Constructed Gender Roles: Ibsen's 'A Doll's House' in Focus

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### Abstract

Language plays an important role in human life that can be seen from various perspectives such as the cultural perspective, linguistic perspective, social perspective, psychological perspective, perspective of gender and moral and ethical perspectives. This is undoubtedly a proven fact that we use language and at the same time, language uses us to define, designate, tag and shape our places in the society (Cameron, 2005). This role of language is generally suitable for all human race either male or female but the basic purpose of this study is to explain how language shapes a woman's place and identity in society. Often we find that women face linguistic discrimination in two different ways: one is the way; they are taught to speak and use language and the other way is about how language treats them (Lakoff, 2004). These linguistic disparities tend to specify a woman's role and function in the society as a sex object, a servant, a wife, a daughter, a mother and specifically a woman (Kerber, 1988). The researcher collected the data for this study from Ibsen's (1999) 'A Doll's House' in which different lexical items, phrases and sentences were uttered intentionally to explain the role of the main character Nora as a wife, as a daughter and as a woman. The researcher examined the speeches of different characters only to show the language –made and man- made places of women in the society. For this purpose, the researcher used a theoretical framework based on the qualitative approach while consulting the related ideas of Lakoff (2004) who, in her 'Dominance Theory,' explains how language shapes a woman's place in the society by analyzing her own speeches and the speeches of different people in the society. The findings of the study go a long way in telling people and the upcoming researchers that language not only specifies gender roles individually, but also internally and externally as well. Basically different social characters surrounding a woman use language in such a way that it starts shaping a woman's character in different sub- characters as explained in the work of Ibsen (1999). Furthermore, language use tells us that a man remains a man in every situation either as a father, as a husband, as a son, and above all as a man but a woman's place in society is changeable according to language use and those tagged names that men have used for women ever. For example, if a little girl talks roughly like a boy, she is scolded by her parents and

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friends (Lakoff, 2004). This process of socialization is harmful in the sense that it is making women weak, incapable and less –confident but if we analyze the last lines spoken by Nora in the selected text of Ibsen (1999), we come to know that constant battering and hammering of socialization and generalization are now making women aware of their individual place and identity in the society and they are now looking at life from a different perspective that is still unacceptable in the man-made society (Kramer, 1974). This study will open new avenues for sociolinguists to study language and gender keenly and critically.

**Keywords:** dominance theory, gender language, socialization, linguistic disparities, sociolinguistics, woman’s place

### Introduction

Many people still think that language and gender research is only an inquiry into the differences between how men and women use language although it is more concerned with gender identities and gender practices. This shift is related to sociolinguistic research in which the linguistic construction of social identities and social relations is investigated and this phenomenon will be illustrated below through the selected text.

According to Butler (1990), gender is not the tag we are born with rather it is a practice that we do or perform and language shapes the socially –constructed gender. Actually in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the people of Europe held the notion that men are the sole authoritative and responsible figures towards their families and women are born to bear the brunt of their families in the sense that they are supposed to obey their husbands and they are also bound to play a second fiddle in front of them. Moreover, they are not allowed to do anything without their husband’s consent. This notion is about the lives of women in the social context and these bureaucratic ideologies diminish the woman’s role in the society. Ibsen’s ‘A Doll’s House’ focuses on the same issue in t letter and spirit and it also focuses on the social and ideological aspects regarding how women are perceived especially in the context of the social values and duties of both men and women.

*“A Doll House’ is no more about women’s rights than Shakespeare’s Richard II is about the divine right of kings, or Ghosts about syphilis.. . . Its theme is the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she is and to strive to become that person.” (M. Meyer 457)*

Many feminists strived to make people aware of the difficulties of women and particularly of married women and they seemed to be more concerned with the ways that differentiated between the forms of oppression representing gender

inequality and helped them in their understanding of the problems of “real” women outside the “imagined” constructs that portrayed women as subjects (Ruthven, 1984). What Ibsen tries to capture in his drama is to change the meanings of gender that have been generalized in our culture since many times.

It should be noted that in gender ideologies and power hierarchies the term ‘imperialism’ is used as a tool of “a violent encounter within pre-existing hierarchies of power and gender that took place not only as an unfolding of its own inner destiny but also as an untidy, opportunistic interruption with other regimes of power” (Giddens, 1991). The operation of patriarchy and gender inequality within the domestic context was the pre-existing hierarchy of power and gender. What Ibsen explains is that 'cult of domesticity' through which the basic rule of the assertion of patriarchal rule over other women has become a lame excuse of mistreating women in order to control them.

*“All female, or no woman at all, Nora loses either way. Frivolous, deceitful, or Unwomanly, she qualifies neither as a heroine nor as a spokeswoman for feminism. Her famous exit embodies only "the latest and shallowest notion of emancipated womanhood, abandoning her family to go out into the world in search of 'her true identity" (Freed- man 4).*

In any case, it is only the naive Nora who believes that she might make a life for herself and the audience can see most clearly how Nora is exchanging a practical doll's role for an impractical one. The great wave of emancipation which is now sweeping across the civilized world means nominally nothing more than women should have the right to education, freedom to work, and political enfranchisement-nothing in short but the ordinary rights of an adult human being in a civilized society.

Actually men living in a male- dominating society never pay any heed towards the differences between the duties of women pertaining to class, race, culture, feelings, and traditions. Hence feminism in Ibsen’s work is against patriarchy on the basis of its being an utterly ‘euro-centric’ phenomenon. Thus it is irrational to hope that women living in a male-dominating society are to be valued, appreciated and justified at the oppressor’s hands. So this long- lasting patriarchal tendency to homogenize and universalize women is totally unbearable. Ibsen in his drama, points out the same thing that ‘leaving the men’s world’ is the only way of finding solutions and to solve the problems of subordinate women. In short all oppressed women hope for a world in which differences are celebrated and enjoyed.

Delphy ([1992](#)) states that Ibsen's play, 'A Doll's House' is noticeable because it unveils patriarchal atrocities and the issues regarding the identity of women. According to him, the representations of the women in the play have been criticized because they are based on various axes of power. So these problematic representations should be reconsidered by women.

In the current study, the researcher only talks about the feministic perspective of gender as Simon de Beauvoir once said: "*Women are not born they are made.*" We find this maxim true when we analyze the selected text of Ibsen ([1999](#)) in which the main character Nora is bound to follow the orders of her father and husband not because they are right but only because they are men.

It is not easy to understand how language shapes gender identities. However, when we critically analyze the selected text, we come to know the actual use of language in shaping and tagging a woman's place in the society. It has been discussed, already that the researcher has used Lakoff's ([2004](#)) 'Dominance Theory' as a theoretical framework for this study. In this theory, the basic emphasis is on the fact that men use more dominant language than women in order to show that women need men to reassure their conversation. This theory also proves that women act as an inferior and less dominant creature in the presence of men and they also use tag questions in front of them only to confirm the validity of their speech. No doubt, Robin Tolmach Lakoff was an accomplished feminist writer who designed pioneer models such as the 'Deficit Model' and the 'Dominance Model'. She said:

*"Sociologically, it is probably fairly obvious that a woman in most subcultures in our society achieves status only through her father's, husband's or lover's position. What is remarkable is that these facts show up linguistically in non-obvious ways."*(58)

Ibsen ([1999](#)) was considered as an influential man and dramatist of theatre during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He is best known for his social plays and his major works are: Love's Comedy, The Pretenders, Brand, Ghosts, A Doll's House and Hedda Gabbler . The drama 'A Doll's House' is all about the 19<sup>th</sup> century women fighting for their economic and social rights. Moreover, they were considered as a passive agent and a sex object as they were not allowed to go outside their homes and were only meant for child bearing.(Eckert & McConnell , [1992](#)). In the opinion of Kaur ([2016](#)), the play portrays the age when women were enslaved in their socially- constructed gender roles and were unaware of their roles as 'self' because they were living under the system of patriarchy in which they had no control over their own lives. As Hossain ([2015](#)) claims:

*“Ibsen, however, has carefully constructed Nora so that her independent and far-sightedness might have always shown through her adolescent capriciousness. This mixture of wisdom and childishness is Nora’s strongest quality. It enables her to oppose the knowledge of books and the doctrines of her worldly husband and to test by experience the social hypothesis which declares duty to the family is the most sacred.”*

Furthermore, a comparison between Nora and Christine which depicts Nora as a house wife and a materialistic woman and Christine Linde as a working and a bold lady makes a new shift at the end of the drama where Nora takes a decision to leave the house to find her own identity. Esmaeil and Mazandarani (2015) say:

*“Nora attempts to show the journey of such a woman as she gradually comes to the conclusion that her life and identity are a lie, and her real needs and aspirations go beyond the bounds of her marriage.”*

### **Analysis**

Undoubtedly, many researchers have been doing research on ‘A Doll’s House from a feminist perspective since its publication but the play has another perspective too, that is. the perspective of the socialization of male and female characters. This paper further explores this process of socialization by examining different phrases and sentences spoken by the main characters Helmer and Nora to analyze the role of language in socializing the woman’s role in society. From the very start of the play, we can explain the first sentence spoken by a male character to a female character in the role of his wife: *“Is that my little skylark twittering out there?”* According to Lakoff (2004), men are more possessive and they use language to demean the role of women in the society. In this sentence the lexeme ‘My’ refers to the concept of possession as to show that they are the possessors of women and there are many phrases such as: ‘My dear little Nora’, ‘Is my little Squirrel out of temper?’ and ‘My little Songbird’. Moreover, the word little refers to something small and dependent. The words like ‘skylark’, ‘songbird’, and ‘squirrel’ also refer to Nora’s role as a sex object made for man’s pleasure.

### **Nora’s Role as a Wife**

All these phrases show that women have no choice of their own and they have to work according to their possessors’ will. This is clearly illustrated through this piece of text: *“No, a wife cannot borrow without her husband’s consent”*(14). The line spoken by Mrs. Linde clearly portrays the role of Nora as a wife and there are many more phrases and sentences that clearly depict the miserable situation of

Nora as a wife. As Helmer says, *“Has my little spendthrift been wasting money again?”* (03) in Act 1 that Nora is a spendthrift and she must be careful in spending her husband’s money. When Nora tells him that she is only spending money on reasonable means then Helmer appreciates her in the following words: *“Nice?--because you do as your husband wishes?”*(39). After knowing that Nora is only following her husband’s set rules he further pampers her like a naive child and tells her, *“Nora, I have often wished that you might be threatened by some great danger, so that I might risk my life's blood, and everything, for your sake”*(69). He further says: *“You have loved me as a wife ought to love her husband. Only you had not sufficient knowledge to judge of the means you used”*(72). Meanwhile, when Nora asks Helmer not to fire Krogstad and she further asks him to change his decision, Helmer at once, bursts into anger and starts imposing his male dominance over Nora by saying:- *“Is it to get about now that the new manager has changed his mind at his wife's bidding”*(39). In Act 111, when Helmer comes to know that Nora has borrowed money from Krogstad only to save her husband’s life, he once again gets angry and starts humiliating Nora in the following words: *What a horrible awakening! All these eight years--she who was my joy and pride--a hypocrite, a liar--worse, worse--a criminal! The unutterable ugliness of it all!--For shame! For shame!*(70). This type of language used by Helmer clearly gives the reader a glance of Nora’s role as a wife and a subservient creature that has no right to make decision without her husband’s consent. *“And I must sink to such miserable depths because of a thoughtless woman!”*(70). The term ‘thoughtless woman’ used by Helmer clearly depicts a man’s domineering nature over a woman. Here, we can only think of a woman as a sex object for a man because women are thoughtless and naive under the so-called strong and powerful brooding of men as said by Helmer: *“I have broad wings to shelter you under.”*(73). This line is spoken by Helmer when he comes to know that Krogstad has taken his charge back and now he was sound and safe. Lakoff (2004) was right in claiming that woman’s position in the society depends on the impression she builds upon others and how other people view her in her societal roles. A woman as a wife must be compliant and subservient if she wants to survive in this society. Moreover, she has no option to do anything else on her own behalf against her husband’s will (Eakembarer, 2007).

### **Nora’s Role as a Mother**

Nora’s role as a mother is clearly illustrated in Act 1 of the play where Nora tells Christine about her lovely children whom she loves a lot in the following words: *“Oh, you sweet blessings! Look at them, Christine! Aren't they darlings?”*(21). In the next scene, the reader can easily see Nora playing with her



kids: *“She and the children laugh and shout, and romp in and out of the room; at last NORA hides under the table, the children rush in and out for her, but do not see her; they hear her smothered laughter, run to the table, lift up the cloth and find her”* (22). However, soon Helmer makes Nora realized that she must be honest and faithful in her duties as a wife and a mother because in his opinion, *“Almost everyone who has gone to the bad early in life has had a deceitful mother”* (32). Coates (2015), claims that in the play, Nora performs her role as a mother very well as she remains at home only to take care of her children. She is not satisfied with that role because it doesn’t suit her potential. She plays with her children like dolls as her father used to play with her. *“I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa's doll-child; and here the children have been my dolls”* (74). At the end, she leaves her children as she says: *“Never to see my children again either--never again* (69).

### **Nora’s Role as an Individual**

Nora, the protagonist of the play, comes up as an individual at the end of the story by taking the bold decision of leaving her husband’s house. *“I must try and educate myself--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”* (75). She takes this extreme step not to free herself from her duties as a ‘mother’ and as a ‘wife’ but only to educate her to reach the sublimity of her own ‘self’ and ‘individuality’. As Nora says in Act 111: *“I have been greatly wronged, Torvald--first by papa and then by you”*(74). She further clears her point by saying: *“He called me his doll-child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls”* (74). Moreover, she wants to break all bonds of marriage due to which she feels estranged and alienated in her own house. She tells her husband how she has been ill-treated until now in the following words: *“I mean that I was simply transferred from papa's hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste, and so I got the same tastes as you else’s I pretended to”* (74). She further tells him that: *“You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life”*(74). Nora’s decision at the end depicts a great shift in the sense that a man has no right to treat his wife badly and to treat her as his possession and property. He must understand that a wife is firstly a woman and then a wife. She has her own individuality and he must not make her identity tainted and blemished (Romaine, 2003). When Helmer tells Nora that she is taking a wrong decision because she is a wife and a mother and she has no right to free herself from these roles; Nora replies: *“I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are”*(76). The last serious conversation between the husband and wife in Act 111 changes their previous roles as Nora



tells her husband to look at their marriage from a totally new perspective. Nora further says that she has to think about other duties. Helmer asks her: *“Are they not your duties to your husband and your children?”* (76). She tells him that she has been performing her duties as a wife and a mother for many years but now she is more concerned towards another sacred duties that is *“Duties to myself”* (76). She tells him that she is going to prove that: *“I am going to see if I can make out who is right, the world or I”* (77). After saying this, she leaves the house by slamming the door with a loud bang. Undoubtedly, this act of Nora shows her remarkable resilience at the end of the play (Marianne, 2004). From the above-mentioned extracts of the text, the reader can easily find the difference between Nora’s different societal roles. The analysis done by the researcher clearly explains that language is an important tool that shapes different societal roles especially of women. As Baseer et al. (2013) point out :

*“The society is a male-dominated society where language is a tool in the hands of the dominating gender, and is utilized fully to create an impression of ruler and be ruled; possessor and possessed, supervisor and subservient.”*

Moreover, Lakoff’s (2004) claim is right that the language used by people, particularly men, shapes women’s role as a ‘second being’. She further explained that society provides titles for women when referring to them as married or unmarried such as ‘MISS’, ‘MRS’ and ‘MS’. However, it doesn’t confer any title to men in this case. Lakoff elaborated that language provides other choices for woman such as the word ‘lady’ is used instead of the word ‘woman’ as a euphemism and a polite term. However, Lakoff (2004) pointed out that:

*“It might also be claimed that lady is no euphemism because it has exactly the same connotation as woman, is usable under the same semantic and contextual conditions. But a cursory inspection will show that this is not the case.”* (58)

## Conclusion

Hence it is proved from the above discussion that language shapes different societal roles of both men and women. However, the analysis of the selected text clearly depicts how language shapes the main character Nora’s role as a wife, as a mother and as a ‘self’. While performing the role of a wife, Helmer, the husband of Nora says that men never sacrifice their honor for the sake of their wives: *“But no man would sacrifice his honor for the one he loves”* (78). The language used by Nora claims that this is the thing women have been doing since forever: *“It is a*

thing hundreds of thousands of women have done” (78). So, the researcher concludes this study with the hope that this study will go a long way in making new shifts in language and gender studies and it will also open new avenues for the upcoming researches in this field.

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