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DOI <https://doi.org/10.32838/2710-4656/2021.3-2/26>**Diordiieva A. V.**

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## FEMINIST CRITIQUE AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO INTERPRETING H. IBSEN'S "A DOLL'S HOUSE"

*The article deals with the issue of interpreting the role and ambitions of the main female character in Henrik Ibsen's play "A Doll's House". The authors offer a comprehensive analysis from two different viewpoints that provide an insight into the interpretation of the play through the prism of feminist critique and phenomenology. The articles emphasizes that the position of a woman in the household of the patriarchal society was predominantly ornamental. Following the story of Nora's awakening from her metaphorical sleep, where she happily chirps like a bird in her presumably happy marriage, the authors delve into how the protagonist realizes that her husband is not the dignified and loving man she used to believe he was and he never actually lived up to his own ideals. Torvalds in no time withdraws from Nora as his wife and the mother of his three children and it does not matter to him that Nora commits forgery only to get the money to save his own life and then lies to him in order to spare his sense of dignity. Nora is terrified and stupefied to realize that she is now just a hideous criminal and a dishonest "unprincipled woman" who "destroyed his whole happiness" and "ruined his future".*

*Another viewpoint the authors take to analyze the play is phenomenology from the works of Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schultz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman. The concepts of phenomenology that the researchers use in this article are epoché, being Nora's assumption that she lives in an ideal world where she is happily married to the man who would stand up to "shield her with his broad wings" whatever happens; specific shock, i.e. certain ground-breaking event ruining the settled order things, which in the story of A Doll's House is the blackmail attempt revealing Torvald's true face; ultimate horizon of Nora's life-world is her aspiration to pay off the loan she took to afford the life-saving trip for her husband without the husband's knowing, etc. Consequently, this papers claims that Nora Helmer's desire to leave her husband, her home and children can be explained by her newly-arising aspiration to "deliberately arrest the spontaneity of her experience and turn the attention upon herself".*

**Key words:** phenomenological approach, woman' role, feminist critique, metaphorical dream, Nora's awakening.

**Outline of the problem in general and its connection with important scientific or practical tasks.** The rights and role of a woman in a still predominantly patriarchal society has always been a worthy and sensitive topic to analyze. The ever changing world is presenting us with more and more challenges, yet the question of a woman's rights in the modern society still remains largely unanswered. One of the first authors to draw attention to this issue, sometimes called "the first male feminist", Henrik Ibsen is known for having created strong outstanding female characters, such as Nora Helmer, Mrs. Alving, Hedda Gabler, and Hilda Wangel. This paper focuses on the character of Nora Helmer, a woman who seems flirty and frivolous at first sight but is capable of doing something much more serious than anyone

would expect from her. This paper will investigate the main character from "A Doll's House" using two approaches at the same time – feminism critique and phenomenology.

**Analysis of recent articles and publications researching this issue with highlights on previously unresolved parts of the general problem that the article is dealing with.** Ibsen's female characters have never been under the radar of researchers. Among those who studied the playwright's unconventional women were A. Asbjorn, S. Ahmed, M. Rifat, J. Afroze, L. Balnam, R. Ahmad, A. Wani and others. Thus, Amir Hossain in "Ibsen's Treatment of Women" states that each Ibsen's female character, including Nora is "first and foremost a human being, rather than merely a woman". The researcher

also states that Ibsen tries to “show woman’s protesting mood, their destructive forces through creating powerful female characters” “...striving for authenticity against the unconscious hypocrisy of males in their patriarchal society” [3, p. 1–3]. Analyzing Nora’s motives behind her famous walk out of the house, Rayees Ahmad and Aasif Rashid Wani in “The Concept of Feminism in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*” state that she primarily aspires for “individual freedom <...> for self-development whereby she is to become a person in her own right and also in the sight of others”. The researchers outline the rigidity of the suffocating patriarchal society where a “woman cannot be herself” [1, p. 1]. However, feminist critique of the play does not seem to have been previously compared with phenomenological interpretation before.

**The purpose of the article.** Considering that the issue of woman’s role in the society is still an urgent and largely unresolved one and Nora Helmer’s personality is far from fully understood, this article attempts to interpret Nora Helmer’s character through two separate perspectives – feminist critique and phenomenological approach.

**Presentation of the main material of the research with proof of the obtained scientific results.** Written in the beginning of the 20-th century Henrik Ibsen’s drama “*A Doll’s House*” realistically portrays the ornamental position of a woman in the household that was generally characteristic of the epoch. Being constantly occupied with everyday petty troubles as well as her big and little secrets, Nora considers herself genuinely happy and seems hardly aware that her husband treats her like a pet rather than a human being. Both Nora and Torvald need a shock of Krogstad’s villainy letter to realize the truth about their lives. Torvald’s stunning revelation was the realization that his treasured wife is not an innocent lark whose main business is to chirp and dance to amuse him. Torvald is astonished to find out that Nora is a secretive intelligent person, able of a crime as he sees it. However, Nora’s insights seem much more painful: she realizes that she is married to a man who only declares that he wants to protect her and “shield her with his broad wings” [6, p. 126] from whatever disaster may come. In reality, when the catastrophe of the Krogstad’s letter, revealing Nora’s deception and forgery comes forward, Nora suddenly becomes aware that her beloved husband is in fact a coward and a traitor whose main concern is public opinion and outward decency of his position.

The irony of Torvald’s situation lies in the fact that he is actually not aware that he himself vividly

represents the vices he condemns most – moral corruption and lying. His moral corruption is his vanity and oversensitive perception of himself in the eyes of the society. He wants everybody to see him dignified, a successful career man and a strict but loving husband. He claims that he would not “condemn a man for a single false step” in order to look generous and big-hearted in his own and his wife’s eyes. However, Nora, along with the reader, realizes those are merely words that Torvald never intends to live up to, as he contradicts them multiple times. Moreover and more importantly, Nora grasps that Torvald will immediately stop being protective and patronizing of her as soon as he finds out that she is a more complicated person than he has always assumed. Upon finding out that Nora has committed a crime of forging her father’s signature to get a money loan from Krogstad, Torvald in no time withdraws from Nora as his wife and the mother of his three children. It does not matter to him that Nora commits forgery only to get the money to save his own life and then lies to him in order to spare his sense of dignity. Nora is terrified and stupefied to realize that she is now just a hideous criminal and a dishonest “unprincipled woman” who “destroyed his whole happiness” and “ruined his future” [6, p. 107]. Furthermore, Nora is stunned to find out that they must go on living as they “have always done; but of course only in the eyes of the world” [6, p. 108]. It is unbearable for Nora to become aware that Torvald is not the man she fell in love with – someone she thought he “deeply and wonderfully loves” her and “would not hesitate a moment to give his very life” for her sake [6, p. 75]. Not only Torvald is unwilling” to give his very life” for Nora’s sake, it never even occurs to him to take the charge of forgery upon himself. In fact, his greatest fear is that people will think that he was “at the bottom of it all and even egged her on” [6, p. 108].

The evening Torvald reads two of Krogstad’s letters – one blackmailing him and the other where Krogstad apologizes for the first one, – Nora’s eyes open to see not only the real person her husband is but also the truth about her own life and marriage. It becomes evident that Torvald’s attitude to women in general is somewhat like people perceive furniture or an article of interior design. For instance, he advises Mrs. Linden to pick up embroidery instead of knitting only because it looks “prettier”: “You hold the embroidery in the left hand so, and then work the needle with the right hand, in a long, easy curve, don’t you?” while “knitting is always ugly” [6, p. 107]. He could as well be talking about fitting a vase of an appropriate color into the room. Torvald is also especially eager to help

Nora dress up for parties and then rejoice in watching his wife to be the most beautiful woman in the dancing-hall. This also reveals Torvald's vanity and sexism. When Nora finally understands that, it becomes unbearable for her to go on living with the man like that under the same roof. She outgrows herself from being a "dancing and singing lark" to a person who wants "to educate" [6, p. 130] herself. Nora doubts herself being able to raise her own children and being a role-model for them. She does not want to be a "fit wife" for Torvald anymore, and she wants to settle everything by herself, without Torvald's help.

**Phenomenological approach to understanding *Doll's House*.** The main problems analyzed in Edmund Husserl's article "Objectivity and the World of Experience" are the following: a) the problem of historical possibility of "objective" science; b) the problem of the possibility of the objective scientific knowledge. Considering the perceived world as a "Heraclitian flux of ever-changing data of sensible things" [4, p. 343], Husserl posits that everything we might think we know about the world we live in is only relative compared to the total amount of information generally known about this world. Thus, acquiring any kind of knowledge becomes "continually possible process of correction" [4, p. 343], of what we already know and, therefore, "knowing" anything in perfection becomes theoretically impossible. Husserl suggests the method the science can use to overcome this paradox. The method of idealization consists in ascribing to any object in reality an ideal of knowledge about it which can and should be perfected infinitely [4, p. 347].

Another Husserl's article "The Life-World and the World of Science" deals with comparison of two modes of living – that of ordinary people and the other of scientists. According to the article all people who are not involved in scientific research live in their own thematic worlds the horizons of which are marked by these people's ultimate goal or areas of interest. The goal or interests are termed as people's "vocation" and make people indifferent to anything else but events or knowledge connected to this "vocation" of theirs [5, p. 378]. Compared to such rather separate "life-worlds", the "worlds of science" are hierarchically and systematically organized and serve "premises, building stones" to one another. This world of science, being also a "life-world" in the sense that individual scientists have their personal ultimate "ends", is growing in infinitum [5, p. 380].

Alfred Schultz' research investigates the notion of multiple realities: the reality of daily life, of dreams, of science and of personal opinion. According to his

article "Realities from Daily Life to Theoretical Contemplation" every person at any age has an accumulated stock of experiences that serve this person as a "scheme of references" [7, p. 26]. One of the main concepts of this approach is people's "natural attitude" to life, i. e. practical interest in the world. Maintaining this natural attitude, people normally take their assumptions about the world that surrounds them for granted and only something extraordinary in the normal course of events can make them question these assumptions. Rather than suspending their belief in the reality of the world or placing the world between brackets (as in phenomenological epoché), people with natural attitude tend to "put between the brackets the doubt that the world and its objects might be otherwise than they appear to be" [7, p. 27]. Schulz calls this phenomenon the epoché of natural attitude. Another important concept in Schultz' theory is the notion of "specific shock" [7, p. 37]) that is pre-requisite for people with natural attitude to reality in order for them to "abandon" their attitudes toward this reality and put it in question [7, p. 37]. The reality of daily life is characterized by people's full-awakeness that is considered to be the "highest degree of tension of consciousness" [7, p. 41] and is opposed to the world of dreams that happens in the complete relaxation of deep sleep. "Working", being an important concept in the world of daily life, can be defined as a conscious attempt to realize some "underlying project" [7, p. 29] while any kinds of actions made by the dreamer are "without purpose or project" [7, p. 42]. In the world of dream the world of daily life is preserved as an object in the form of recollections and retentions while the attention to life, the main component of the world of daily life, is "directed toward the self in the past tense" [7, p. 42]. According to Shultz, one cannot speak and think in the dream world, on the contrary, if the person is speaking and thinking it means they use the "implements of the world of working and they are subject to principles of consistency and compatibility" [7, p. 43]. The implements of the world of theoretical contemplation, on the other hand, are not the attempts to "master the pre-given world" but actions "aimed to observe and possibly understand it" [7, p. 44].

Elaborating the theory of multiple realities, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman introduced the concepts of problematic and unproblematic aspects of reality. The reality is perceived as unproblematic as long as "the routines of everyday life continue without interruption" [2, p. 38]. Another important concept the scientists apply is the notion of common language grounded in everyday life that is used to objectify

any experiences from all the realities. It is the language that makes sure that the reality of everyday life maintains its paramount status, even when the “leaps” between realities take place [2, p. 39–40].

The concepts of phenomenology can be successfully applied to analyze Henrik Ibsen’s play “A Doll’s House”. Thus, Nora’s epoché is her placing the doubt in her husband within brackets and taking for granted the assumption that she lives in an ideal world in which she is happily married to the man who would stand up to “shield her with his broad wings” [6, p. 111]) whatever happens. She does not “stop and think” or “cast doubt” [7, p. 27] upon her senses that, as she believes, tell her how the things in her family are. Her “attention to life” is directed solely to keep her husband unaware of the crime that she committed out of love to him. Using E. Husserl’s terminology, Nora’s ultimate “horizon” of her life-world is her aspiration to pay off the loan she took to afford the life-saving trip for her husband without the husband’s knowing. This aspiration being her “vocation” makes her “indifferent to anything else” [5, p. 379] so she does not notice or pay much attention to the fact that her husband perceives her rather like a pet than a human being. She accepts her husband’s reproaches about her being unpractical and extravagant as part of her daily routine. These reproaches, the general play tone of her relationship with her husband along with the pet names that Torvald gives to her – “my silly squirrel” or “little lark” do not arise as something “problematic” in her daily life routine as long as she is confident about one thing – Torvald loves her so “deeply” and “wonderfully” and “he would not hesitate a moment to give his very life” for her sake [6, p. 67]. Only after Nora experiences the “specific shock” [7, p. 37] of seeing her husband’s reaction to what she has done, she “stops to think” and asks herself questions about the real nature of her life and marriage. This “shock” makes her “leap” or transit between realities: Nora stops existing in the reality of everyday life that, in its turn, stops being “unproblematic” for her and transits into the reality of theoretical contemplation where she is going to engage herself with education and attempts to “know” herself and her “surroundings”. The “shock” or “problematic” turn in her relationship with her husband makes Nora revise her views about her sweet little life in her cozy dollhouse and grasp that all of her life has been nothing more than a playroom – first with her father and then with Torvald and children. Nora symbolically changes her masquerade costume before the final conversation with Torvald: taking off her Capri costume can

be interpreted as “falling of the curtain” [2, p. 39] marking the transition between realities. Nora steps into a new reality where she is no longer a “skipping squirrel” [6, p. 3] or a “little bird” [6, p. 106] but where she is an adult woman who is willing to take her life under her own control.

Nora makes a decision to leave her husband and children in order “to educate herself” [6, p. 115], and her goal becomes the desire to “observe and possibly understand” the reality [7, p. 44]. She suddenly becomes aware in her face-to-face interaction with Torvald that he is much better known to her than her own self which she never stops to reflect upon. Thus, her desire to leave him, her home and children can be explained by the new aspiration to “deliberately arrest the spontaneity of her experience and turn the attention upon herself” [2, p. 44]. She finally wants to understand what kind of a person she really is outside the context of a “doll wife” and a “doll daughter” that her husband and father put her in. Another thing she might subconsciously feel obliged to change about herself and the society in which she lives – is the unfair distribution of the “social stock of knowledge” [2, p. 59]. In the beginning of the play when Krogstad comes to blackmail her, Nora is astonished to find out that many things of this world just go “behind her back” she lives in the patriarchal society where women seldom educate themselves and do not even know that forging a signature is a crime. Nora is overwhelmed with the understanding that the world is much more complicated than she imagined it to be. In Husserl’s terms, Nora becomes aware that everything she thought she knew about the world is almost neglectable compared to the endless mass of knowledge in general. Therefore, in order to change that Nora has to leave her family for good as there are no mechanisms in that patriarchal society for a woman to combine the duties of a wife and mother with self-education and development. She decides to transit from the world of daily life to the world of theoretical contemplation and devote her life to idealization – the process of continual correction of knowledge in infinitum [4, p. 343].

**Conclusions.** Henrik Ibsen’s play “A Doll’s House” illustrates the story of Nora’s awakening step-by-step from being a model wife and her master’s “dolly”. She becomes aware that it just seemed to her that she was happy “doing tricks” for her husband since no one can be truly happy while constantly hiding who they really are. She understands that her communion with Torvald Helmer cannot be called a marriage understood as a voluntary union of two equal people. Torvald appears to be drastically differ-

ent from what she imagined him to be whereas Nora suddenly realizes her inner need to educate herself that becomes her primary aim of existence after leaving her husband and children. In phenomenological terms, Nora's desire to "observe and possibly under-

stand" the reality wins over all the other ambitions in her, therefore she makes the transition from mundane life that most women in the traditional patriarchal society are confined to and thus broadens the horizons of her life-world.

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#### Діордієва А. В., Гриженко Г. Ю. ФЕМІНІСТИЧНИЙ ТА ФЕНОМЕНОЛОГІЧНИЙ ПІДХІД ДО ІНТЕРПРЕТАЦІЇ «ЛЯЛЬКОВОГО ДОМУ» Х. ІБСЕНА

У статті розглядається питання інтерпретації ролі й амбіцій головної героїні п'єси Хенріка Ібсена «Ляльковий дім». Автори пропонують аналіз твору з двох неподібних позицій: крізь призму феміністичної критики та з погляду феноменології Е. Гуссерля, А. Шульца, П. Бергера та Т. Лакмана. У статті підкреслюється, що становище жінки в домоволодінні патріархального суспільства було переважно декоративним. Аналізуючи історію пробудження Нори від її метафоричного сну, де вона щаслива у шлюбі й легковажно цвірінькає, ніби пташка, автори заглиблюються в те, як головна героїня усвідомлює, що її чоловік насправді не є тією гідною і люблячою людиною, якою вона його вважала. До того ж він ніколи не відповідав навіть власним ідеалам. Торвальд негайно відрікається від Нори, своєї дружини та матері трьох його дітей, і для нього зовсім не важливо, що Нора йде на злочин лише для того, щоб отримати гроші на порятунок його, Торвальдового, життя, а потім бреше йому тільки для того, щоб не вразити його почуття гідності. Нора із жахом усвідомлює, що для Торвальда тепер вона просто мерзенна злочинниця й нечесна «безпринципна жінка», яка «знищила все його щастя» та «зіпсувала його майбутнє».

Іншою позицією, яку автори використовують для аналізу п'єси, є феноменологія з праць Едмунда Гуссерля, Альфреда Шульца, Пітера Бергера та Томаса Лакмана. Поняттями феноменології, які дослідники використовують у цій статті, є такі: *erosché*, тобто припущення Нори про те, що вона живе в ідеальному світі, де вона щасливо вийшла за чоловіка, який будь-коли готовий «захистити її своїми широкими крилами», що б не сталося; *specific shock*, тобто певна надзвичайна подія, яка руйнує врегульований порядок (в історії «Лялькового дому» є спробою шантажу, який виявляє справжнє обличчя Торвальда); феноменологічним горизонтом (*horizon*) життєвого світу Нори є її прагнення виплатити позику, яку вона взяла, щоб мати змогу повезти чоловіка в життєво необхідну йому відпустку, тощо. Отже, у цій статті стверджується, що бажання Нори Хелмер залишити свого чоловіка, свій дім і дітей можна пояснити її новим прагненням (термінами феноменології) «навмисно зупинити спонтанність свого досвіду та звернути увагу на себе».

**Ключові слова:** феноменологічний підхід, роль жінки, феміністична критика, метафоричний сон, пробудження Нори.