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Unveiling Oppression: Ibsen's Feminist Lens on Gender Inequality in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Henrik Ibsen's plays such as A Doll's House, Ghosts, and Hedda Gabler critique patriarchal norms and advocate for women's empowerment. These themes resonate strongly in Pakistan, where women face significant social and cultural oppression. The plays' focus on female self-identity and liberation parallels ongoing struggles for women's rights in Pakistan. With the country ranking 164 out of 167 on the Women, Peace, and Security Index, the issue remains critical. Cases like Qandeel Baloch highlight the dangers faced by vocal women. This article explores how Ibsen's feminist narratives challenge patriarchal structures and encourage discourse on gender equality.

PAROLE CHIAVE: *Henrik Ibsen, Gender Inequality, Aurat March, Malala Yousafzai*

AUTORE

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Literature portrays multiple definitions of empowerment, just as feminism that has several currents. It is considerable to note that both concepts are correlated within certain contexts. In this article, *Unveiling Oppression: Henrik Ibsen's Feministic Lens on Gender Inequality in Pakistan*, there is an introduction to the issues faced mainly by Pakistani women; this piece of work elaborates empowerment in one of the earliest definitions of the term as, "a wave of feminism: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities know the mastery over their lives". This highlights it as a core medium of nurturing power in a relationship among people, initiating individuals to gain control over their lives, thus effecting change in them- selves and eventually in others Through self-empowerment and self-discovery, people can face restrictions and may even be able to curb and remove them, gaining self- confidence in asserting themselves, their identity, dignity and individuality or, in other words, their autonomy are all steps enhanced and encouraged by the emergence of feminism. Empowerment mainly focuses on the self; one primarily needs to believe in oneself to be able to effect change as an individual, and hence in the surrounding sphere, community or society. It ignites the needed alteration in one's life and, as Page and Czuba state, "to create change we must change individually to enable us to become partners in solving the complex issues facing us". As such, this initiates and increases the belief in one's capabilities to approach challenges and control one's decision-making to accomplish goals with firm determination. Empowerment thrives in relation with others; it does not abide without human relationships, for it is through them that it is created, and hence arises the view that it "exists within the context of a relationship between people or things. Power does not exist in isolation nor is it inherent in individuals. By implication, since power is created in relationships. Empowerment as a process of change, then, becomes a meaningful concept Mumby on the other hand, elucidates that "empowerment is a process of acquiring power".

Coming to the point of Pakistani society, which is different in this regard having serious consequences. For example, from A Doll House "Nora" leaves her husband and children became a powerful step to be opted in order to assert her own self- recognition against the subjugation and maltreatment. Pakistani women in this situation, are being killed and thrown into the piles of trash when builds a courage to leave their family. However, society of Pakistan hampers all the ways for women when such steps are taken. Besides, their will power is suppressed as happened in the case of Qandeel Baloch. She had dream of becoming, Pakistan's most well-known social media star, and who was brutally strangled to death by her own bosom brother in 2016 having a mask or tag of "honor". The picture or mysterious saga portrays a Pakistan whose sexual repression made Qandeel famous, then deterio

rated her for overstepping the boundaries of what that same society deemed appropriate and good behavior for a woman. A particular and poignant case that reflects the struggles of Pakistani women under such oppressive societal norms is that of Qandeel Baloch. Qandeel became barely famous and got her familiarity for her vigorous and unapologetic online presence, challenging traditional gender roles and speaking boldly about female empowerment, sexuality, and societal hypocrisy—subjects that are often taboo for women in Pakistan. Her actions, resemble Ibsen's characters such as Nora in *A Doll's House* or Hedda in *Hedda Gabler*, informs us about a rebellious nature against the roles thrown upon her by a patriarchal society. However, just as Ibsen's characters observe societal chains and tragic consequences for stepping beyond prescribed gender roles, Qandeel was humiliated by many and eventually silenced through violence. Her death sparked nationwide and international debates about honor killings, women's freedom, and the deeply injected cultural norms that continue to suppress women in Pakistan. Qandeel's case is a modern, real-life example of the same societal pressures and consequences that Ibsen critiqued in his plays more than a century ago, demonstrating the enduring relevance of his work and the ongoing need for gender justice in societies like Pakistan.

Another widely indispensable and soul-stricken case that emerges the plight of women in Pakistan is that of Mukhtar Mai. In 2002, she was ferociously gang-raped on declaration of cruel tribal faction or council (jirga) in the village of Meerwala, Punjab, as a form of severe punishment for a crime allegedly committed by her younger brother. This case exposed gruesome use of women's bodies as tools of retaliation and control in a deeply patriarchal society—shadowing and silhouetting the themes in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, where the sins and actions of men are unjustly borne by women. Despite facing colossal social pressure, threats, and stigmatization,

Mukhtar Mai broke the silence and battled for justice, leading herself a powerful symbol of resistance. Rather than being suppressed and dejected or destroyed like many before her, she demanded the compensation money to open schools for girls in her village, assisting for education and women's rights. Her gallantry parallels the inner strength and thorough rebellion of Ibsen's heroines, particularly Nora, who searches to reframe herself despite social backlash. Mukhtar Mai's story is a sheer or utter reminder of the systemic injustices women face in rural and tribal areas of Pakistan, and her response represents the kind of transformative power that Ibsen's works ultimately advocate: the right of a woman to live with dignity, speak her truth, and change her destiny.

Despite the women's protection laws proceeded by parliament, women continue to be severely assaulted and murdered with depressing regularity, and the perpetrators let off with chilling impunity, as evinced in the case of Khadija Siddiqui, whose would-be murderer was acquitted even after stabbing her 23 times in front

of witnesses. This brutal and shameful act of “honor killing, domestic violence and sexual assault has been elevated by the typical and conservative thinking of Pakistani male-dominated society despite continuing to claim that women and their respect is one of our top priorities.

Misogyny is not a psychological phenomenon — a man's ferocious feelings towards women in general — but rather a force in action: a dominating, policing force that men and women employ in a sexist society to keep women in check. Misogyny is the way of mechanism, through emotional, mental and physical violence, but also by the creation of laws, societal and cultural strictures, and institutions to keep women stay in that inferior position, and that patriarchal mindset having power.

We need to weigh down no further than the boundaries of our own nation to observe how sincere and serious this updated process of misogyny is. Tribal codes, discriminatory laws, steeping and culminating high rates of domestic violence, all work together to curb and police Pakistani women, even as men declare to be their patronage and guardians. Feminisms or feminist movements seize the alteration of women's status under any kind of dominance, particularly masculine.

Women have therefore had a prolonged journey of struggle to explore for their lost selves. Suffering as subordinates under male dominance, they have had very minute or rather no power at all, let alone any hope for one. They have all along been handicapped and marginalized at the backstage of a male-power status quo and have, therefore, needed to be empowered to overcome that odd status. Once a woman gains power, she can act towards the possibility of gaining control and, eventually, becoming able to transform the established misconceptions, both individually and collectively. Feminist empowerment can hence be considered as an anti-oppression discourse in the struggle of gaining control, instead of being power depleted. Through empowerment, women fight for their rights, aiming at being realistically regarded as human beings on equal footing with men without any discrimination.

Malala Yousafzai and feminism: A Reflection through Henrik Ibsen's Dramas

Henrik Ibsen's frequently portrays obstacles imposed on women by severe and raucous society and their courageous efforts to transcend those boundaries. His characters, such as Nora Helmer from *A Doll's House* and Hedda Gabler from *Hedda Gabler*, tend to become rebellious and resist against oppressive conditions where women are chained and vilified at every step of their freedom and boon, endeavoring for self-empowerment. Similarly, Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani a core supporter and active persona for girls' education, encountered a mammoth opposition from a patriarchal society that narrowed her dream to education, yet she persevered and

became an international portrait for women's rights and education. This close connection between Ibsen's feminist ideals and Malala's journey can be experienced through their combined struggles for autonomy, education, and self-determination.

Patriarchy and the Struggle for Education

In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora is caged in traditional roles of wife and mother, restricted by her husband, Torvalds's expectations. Similarly, in *Hedda Gabler*, Hedda feels stifled by the limited opportunities available to her as a woman, unable to meet her intellectual or emotional needs due to societal pressures. Both Nora and Hedda represent women striving more freedom but ultimately being confined by stern patriarchal norms. Their pursuit of self-empowerment symbolizes broader struggle for women's rights to independence" education. This theme is echoed in the real-life story of Malala Yousafzai, who began a procession chanting slogan of girl's education in Pakistan's heart called Swat. Swat is considered valley of heaven. After that, Taliban banned the freedom of Education. This struggle parallels to Ibsen's portrayal of women's limited options. Malala's desire for education showcases Nora's yearning for freedom from domestic chains. The Taliban's dominant and narrow access to education and personal freedom reflects the societal hindrances that Nora, Hedda and Malala direly faced, as they all too were interwoven and interweaved by an environment which was similar and acted harshly, not capable enough to live according to their true aspirations which may assist them to live freely.

Just as Nora's rebellion against her husband's authority is an act of self-liberation, Malala's insistence on pursuing education, despite the grave dangers posed by the Taliban, is a radical act of resistance against the limitations placed on women by a patriarchal society. In *A Doll's House*, Nora's ultimate decision to leave her husband and children in order to discover her own identity and independence is a profound act of courage. In a society that expected her to remain subservient, Nora challenges these norms by choosing a path of personal liberation, even if it means living outside traditional expectations. Similarly, in *Hedda Gabler*, Hedda's frustration with her lack of agency and the constraints imposed upon her lead her to tragic decisions, including her ultimate escape from a life of repression.

Malala's deeds for courage, when she proceeded to speak out for girls' education despite the open threat under the sunlight and facing violence from the Taliban, parallels Nora's and Hedda's attempts to break free from oppressive forces. Malala, like Nora, warns the societal expectations of women and refutes to accept a limited role in life. Malala's head closure shooting which was a narrow escape and hard to be saved by the Taliban in 2012 only further made her bravery as an exemplary much like Nora's symbolic act of "abandoning" her family represents her inner willingness to fight for autonomous approach, even at great personal cost.

Hedda's actions

and though tragic phase can be seen as her own desperate plea for agency, Malala's actions depict a careless and firm resistance against the forces trying to silence her. She believes in the self-recognition and courageous sincerity more than death like coward but like Nora and Hedda, Malala's enthusiasm for personal boon or freedom and equality under her final ray of hope to break through societal obstacles and hindrances.

In *A Doll's House*, Nora's decision to abandon her family brings a reality on the forefront with significant emotional and social repercussions. Her husband, Torvald, does not even dare to observe her actions, and society tags and stamps her as a careless and foolish figure who has left her duties as a wife and mother. In *Hedda Gabler*, Hedda's actions pertain to a tragic ending and retain a question mark over the society where cruelty has become a normal routine, showing how women's attempts to break out of their prescribed roles often lead to social alienation or even death. Malala's activism, though inspiring to many, also had negative consequences within her community, especially under the strict control of the Taliban. Her advocacy for girls' education made her a target, and her shooting became a symbol of the violent oppression women face when they challenge patriarchal norms. However, unlike Nora and Hedda, Malala did not retreat into social alienation but instead rose as a global figure of resistance, making her an international beacon of hope for women's rights.

Mental Health and Emotional Suppression in the Henrik Ibsen's *The lady from the Sea*

Ellida's character from the *The Lady from the Sea* further enhances a psychological derailment that reflects how muted desires and emotions can lead to mental despair and despondency. Her internal conflict gets roots from not being able to express her will free aspirations. Mental health is a widely arguable topic, pertaining to women. Women are often expected to tolerate emotional griefs in silence, whether it is thrown from abusive relationships, societal expectations, or lack of opportunity. The play highlights on the importance of emotional wellbeing and psychological approach which is often viewed in conservative Pakistani households. Moreover, Sea depicts Ellida's yearning and eagerness to meet life's choices, chances, changes and freedom beyond the imposition of societal typical norms and trends where slavery and servitude becomes mandatory to hamper the women's equality. Many women in Pakistan, being targeted especially featured from the rural areas where conservative urban thinking makes life more as an existing threat. Their pursuit of education, desire for observing the beauty of the world, opting the careers, finding the personal ambitious life and learning new techniques to smoothly navigate life has all been caged by the people who possess such narrow mindedness.

Patriarchy and Power Dynamics: Ellida's marriage portrays patriarchal control in the beginning. Only when her husband turns over his authority and does not allow her to renew her life. Patriarchy is deeply rooted in several aspects of Pakistani society—legal, cultural, and related to familial issues. The idea that women should be *treated* as equal as man on the earth like Ellida is, shares with the ambitions of many women's rights activists in Pakistan, who bring a revolutionary campaign for laws and societal norms that sponsor gender equality.

Women Inequality in Sindh and Balochistan: A Modern Picture of Nora Helmer

In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora Helmer, a woman who raises a voice of power towards emancipation of women. She faces challenges so deeply under the atrocity of patriarchal society in which she desperately dwells. She opted for a permanent deliverance from the clutch of such ferocious act just to meet her identity and self-respect. Nora shows a journey of power and liberation of the gender which adheres to the typical and congested norms that hinder an access of women having free choices.

Similarly, in Sindh, Malala Ali Khatoon (name known hypothetically for this identity or can be replaced with a renowned figure like Shahnaz Ansari, a female MPA from Sindh who became patronage for women's rights until her traumatic death in 2020), stood firmly against patriarchal clutches by plunging herself into the arena of politics and raising her voice for women's empowerment. Like Nora, she refuted expectations, meeting not just symbolic existence but real model and character for many unvoiced voice in a male-dominated society.

Both Nora and Shahnaz showcase the wider efforts of women endeavoring to emphasize their recognition and autonomy in stern and harsh social captures. The issue of inequality in Sindh progresses to manifest in areas such as forced marriages, honor killings, and limited access to education, echoing the themes of dark and locked cell and resistance seen in Ibsen's work. On the other hand, the case of Mah Rung Baloch incident is a recent and soul-stricken case that indicates the severe reflection and challenges overcome by women activists and professionals in Balochistan. Who was Mah Rung Baloch? Mah Rung Baloch was a young Baloch doctor and social media activist from Turbat, Balochistan. She was renowned figure for her peaceful voice and assistance for women's rights, education, and social justice. She made her access to social media to raise her voice about issues often muted and suppressed in her conservative society.

The Incident: In May 2024, Mah Rung was badly tortured and kidnapped under an unknown and ambiguous circumstances in Turbat. While initial reports have

been highlighted that her voice had proved to be spy and meaningless to be recognized, her friends and family claimed she was under continuous threat and threatened to be murdered any time pointing toward honor-based violence or state-linked suppression. The exact details have not been come on the frontline but her struggle for the women of Balochistan is voice of many suppressed women where she came as a light in the dark age of Balochistan era.

Like Nora, Mah Rung Baloch faced severe challenges and raised like equinox from the ingrained patriarchal norms. Nora simply leaves her home behind to embrace the freedom and identity, which society sees her as scandalous. Similarly, Mah Rung's public voice and independence were observed as an open threat in her community.

Henrik Ibsen's plays, particularly *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*, advocate a colossal approach of women's efforts against the chains and deafening of a patriarchal society—struggles that strongly vibrate with the experiences of women in Pakistan. Movements such as the Aurat March for women's rights to autonomy, education, and safety, having a vociferous tendency to Nora's realization that her value possesses beyond her role as a caregiver. The history of women's movements in Pakistan demonstrates a consistent and evolving efforts for gender equality, legal rights, and social justice in a predominantly patriarchal society. From the initial years of independence, organizations like the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA), founded in 1949 by Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, laid the basic root for women's welfare and education, contemplating and considering on empowerment through the lens of social services rather than political activism. However, the political façade had a dramatic shift during the 1980s under General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, which opened conservative Islamic laws such as the Hudood Ordinances that severely hampered women's legal rights. In response, the Women's Action Forum (WAF) was actively formed in 1981 by an active group of lawyers, writers, and activists who began mobility under the shadow of public protests and legal challenges against discriminatory laws. This golden era marked the emergence of a vigorous, secular feminist movement that addressed not only legal reform but also women's possibility and chances in public life. In the beginning of 21st century, a new wave of activism has appeared with the Aurat March, launched in 2018 and held annually on March 8th in cities across Pakistan. Pioneered by younger feminists, the Aurat March has revitalized to the movement, weighing on contemporary issues such as bodily autonomy, workplace harassment, reproductive rights, and gender-based violence. With powerful slogans like: "*Mera jism*", "*meri marzi*", chanting so vociferously (My body, my choice), the march has ignited a national debates, has drawn a wide- spread media focus and news, and faced indispensable backlash from conservative and religious factions. In parallel, digital feminism has obtained a momentum, with online motives such as Girls at Dhabas and Women's Democratic Front creating safe

spaces for dialogue and resistance in a country where public expression for women is often policed. Despite ongoing challenges—ranging from legal discrimination and cultural taboos to physical threats and online harassment—these movements continue to push boundaries and require systemic change. Together, they represent a persistent and dynamic force striving to reenergize the role and rights of women in Pakistan's socio-political fabric. The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Amendment) Act, 2022, highlight an institutional struggles to guard and protect women's rights and safety and active move toward the kind of dynamic and sequential change that Ibsen viewed from the depth of his critique and rigid gender hierarchies. Much like the criticism Nora overcomes and faces challenging traditional typical roles, Pakistani feminists are also often humiliated, threatened, or silenced, yet they persist in demanding justice and recognition. The parallels between Ibsen's fictional narrative and the contemporary feminist strive in Pakistan high- lighting the *universal and timeless relevance* of the fight for gender equality—one that keeps on continuing to unfold on both the stage and the streets.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Qandeel Baloch's case, renown portrait and figure of a so-called "honor killing" in Pakistan, shades the deteriorating and depressing impact of patriarchal norms and societal pressures on women. Her death becomes an existing and arguable topic which has also snatched the core attention of Pakistani society for an urgency and applicable .A societal shift to save women from violence and guarantee their rights has thrilled and become a motivating force for deeds and actions. Qandeel's legacy vibrates to inspire activism and resonates for a more just and equitable society.

Secondly, Mukhtar Mai's case is all about feudal lords and flawed laws of Pakistan as women are grinded and demeaned a meager creature. Lack of evidence as cited by the ruling judges widely and fully support landlords but no the justice to the op- pressed one. Rather court of Pakistan supports the male-dominated and powerful societal figures who have been ruling since years.

Malala Yousafzai's story resonates strongly with the themes explored in Henrik Ibsen's plays, particularly the struggles of women to gain autonomy in a patriarchal society. Ibsen's characters, such as Nora and Hedda, grapple with oppressive gender roles and their desire for freedom, similar to Malala's fight for girls' education and the right to self-determination. Both Malala and Ibsen's female characters face social rejection and even violence for defying societal norms, but their courage to challenge these oppressive forces places them among the most significant feminist figures in history.

In many ways, Malala's fight for education, much like Nora's decision to leave her family or Hedda's tragic struggle for freedom, embodies the universal and timeless struggle for women's rights and the pursuit of equality. Through these connections, we see how literature can powerfully reflect and shape the real-world experiences of women in oppressive environments, making Ibsen's works deeply relevant in the context of contemporary feminism, especially in societies like Pakistan.

On the other hand, *The Lady from the Sea* is not merely a 19th-century European play - it's meaningful lens through which we can explore modern gender issues in places like Pakistan. It fulfils the pledges of the universal need for women's liberation, the right to self-depiction, and the significance of choice in love and life. While Pakistan has brought some prosperity in recent years, Ibsen's themes remain deeply pertinent in showcasing what still requires to change.

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