

The Use of the Gun and the Myth of Freedom¹

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Abstract In *A Doll's House* Nora has admonished a life living through hypocrisy and falsehood, and consequently her departure from that life has been the most crucial point. In the twenty-first century *Nora* still retains the position of an administrator of shocking revelations, sometimes through directorial extravaganza as is the case with Thomas Ostermeier's *Nora* at the Schaubühne, in which Nora does not slam the door on the husband but rather shoots him dead. Nora's reinvention in the new European context reveals something about the male imagination namely that it loves to play with female objects devoid of realities and possibilities. This technique of playing with *femme fatale* has made playwrights and directors popular, and it is becoming customary outside the West too. The Centre for Asian Theatre's *Resurrection* is an example with the last scene presenting Irene chasing and knocking Rubek down with a gun. The paper intends to critique the myth of freedom projected through the use of gun in these two productions suggesting that emancipation of women remains a far cry because they are still seen and projected through the authority of men's desires.

Key words *femme fatale*; reinvention; revelation; myth of freedom

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In the play *A Dolls House* Torvald calls Nora "mad" and her action "monstrous," which probably has nothing to do with Ostermeier's monstrous Nora who kills Torvald quite arbitrarily. I address Ostermeier's Nora as "monstrous" exposing my position as someone against her monstrosity, and I think that the whole idea of changing Nora into a killer doll itself is perverted. Goethe once wrote about the German reception of Kalidas's *Shakuntala*, "that our sensibilities, customs, and ways of thinking have developed so differently from those in this Eastern nation that even an important work such as this . . . can have little success here" (Fischer-Lichte 362). Similarly, I may have a misunderstanding of the present day German theatre practices, which is different from the theatre practice in the Indian Subcontinent. As an Ibsen scholar, I posit that Ibsen's original intention has been submerged to a great extent. Ibsen never wanted to show men and women as mortal enemies, and shooting and killing between them was never his intended prescription for women's emancipation. It must be acknowledged that these days Ibsen has largely been living through international reception, and the various productions in different cultures have witnessed a great range of experimentations. Thus innovation has become essential, and such innovation is healthy too. This particular German production has been celebrated for its novelty and acute shock upon the audience, and it is difficult to go against its popularity.

There are good inventions in the Ostermeier production; postmodern theatre with all its essences is here. From the revolving stage to the rocking lifestyle—everything is included in the production. Despite the necessity of innovation in the autonomous world of theatre it must be mentioned that the production provokes feminist ideas regarding exploitation of the female body on the stage. *The New York Times'* Theater page comments that violence is both a symptom and the only means of escape from the poisonous social system the play depicts. Ostermeier refashioned the conclusion to provoke a spasm of shock to the audience of today's more shock-absorbent age. The play presupposes that Ibsen's original ending has no intrinsic meaning for the audience of contemporary theatre audience. Still the coverage criticised the violation of the original spiritual dimension in the following way:

Certainly, as cultures evolve, the perceived significance of any given work of art will change. And Mr. Ostermeier's production commendably translates the play's social dimensions. But it also violates its spiritual ones. Nora may, in the play's famous last scene, claim that her sheltered life has left her with no moral bearings, but the audience knows better. We can rightly judge that Nora's transgression was more a legal than an ethical one, her motivations far purer than those of her self-regarding husband. In altering Ibsen's ending, Mr. Ostermeier has drawn a veil across Nora's spiritual awakening. Unless, of course, he believes the moral high ground can be taken by force. (Isherwood)

The spiritual agency or the moral ground that makes the audience empathize with Nora's cause has been removed for the sake of producing shock. In an interview Ostermeier told: "It's just that it was very shocking to society at the end of the 19th century that a woman should leave her husband and children. We can't nowadays have the same moment of shock when two thirds of families split up" (Kalb).

I do not have any argument against this, and I like at least half a dozen things he has done in his production. Ostermeier updates the play to a contemporary setting: the action takes place in a luxury-apartment that represents contemporary architectural style, which is described as "post-Bauhaus nightmare" by many. Dr. Rank is younger than usually played and is bisexual and HIV-positive. The multilevel house attracts the audience with its twenty-first century furniture and huge platform representing the catwalk for the model-like Nora whose physical attraction affects even the tramp Krogstad. The characters use cell phones and laptops, which is also commendable. The introduction of a black au pair as the children's nanny is also a good import. Occasionally, the characters burst into fits of momentary hysteria that is also skillfully used to show the restlessness of postmodern life.

Above all, the idea of using Lara Croft image from the video games for Nora is extremely contemporary and realistic. Nora, instead of dancing a tarantella, excites Torvald by dressing up as Lara Croft. Ostermeier wrote in an e-mail from Berlin about Nora's Lara Croft costume:

Lara Croft is a male fantasy; men think it's sexy to see strong women. But in re-

ality many of them don't believe in equality. Nora is initially fulfilling her husband's male fantasy when she dresses up like Lara Croft. When she really does use a weapon and does what Lara Croft does in the video games, it's no longer funny for the men. (Kalb)

The use of the huge fish tank as a living symbol on the stage may be interpreted as the modern enclosure that binds humans in the name of freedom and enlightenment. Nora herself has become an image. According to critics like Kalb, "she today belongs both to Ibsen and to the world as a marvelously variable repository of skepticism about the much-touted advances for her sex." The play raises the question whether anything has fundamentally changed for women in 130 years. Probably, that is why Krogstad's sexual attraction for Nora is a valid concept. His attempt to assault her makes the play dirty, but resonates with reality. Every single man on the stage is attracted to her sexually, and Dr. Rank, who was a kind of psychological refuge for Nora, proves to be the worst as his hands frequently slide up Nora's skirt. The play has proved the reality of the post-modern and post-industrialized world where women are commodities that anyone can use, and sex and violence have become the most available trades.

Even if all these realities are accepted, it becomes difficult to bear the fact that Nora actually kills Torvald with the gun. The myth of freedom is associated with the myth of armed women. Lara Croft is a resurrected figure of the ancient amazons. It is true that probably hundreds of women may have wanted to kill Torvald through centuries, but the killing process itself is a very ill-judged implementation of the well judged plot. I recall one of Professor Erika Fischer-Lichte's classes where the play *Nora* was discussed. The discussion mainly centered on Nora's role as a killer. We thought her hysterical, possessed, and some of us went so far as to call her typically Nazi. I wonder if Ostermeier ever thought that he would place her on the turntable again. While in this era Nora should have been safe with her emancipated life I wonder why he has created her figure as one that can be questioned and crucified again.

I agree with Julie Holledge who writes that in this production there is no room for rational female agency: "Ostermeier gives his audience visual and kinaesthetic pleasure at the expense of a subjective identification with his Nora. Anne Tismer is too out of it to allow an empathetic connection" (Holledge).

Contemporary German theatre is called director's theatre. Probably Toril Moi is right in her judgement about Ostermeier's assessment of Ibsen's modernism. He thought that Ibsen is not modern enough and to modernise the playwright the director took his freedom to alter the ending. It is not enough to say that Ostermeier misrepresented Nora, I would even claim that both Ibsen and Ostermeier abused her. In the 19th century Ibsen exploited her to become famous. His original intention was to show the vulnerability of the social institution called marriage. But the world interpreted it as a mother's departure from the life of her children. I am talking about negative criticism of the play. Of course, Nora was unable to live with a man who insulted her sole existence as a human being, not only as a woman. Still, she could not avoid the consequences. In this century Ostermeier has turned her into a killer doll, who has shaken the very root of married life.

This reminds of Patricia Klindienst's claim that "Patriarchal culture feels that... something monstrous is incorporated when the woman returns from exile to tell her own story" (Klindienst 621). In this post modern production Torvald spits on Nora's face, Rank places his hands in between her legs to prove his love, Krogstad uses physical force on her, and as a consequence she also learns the language of violence. Ostermeier's intention is to show that virtually all human interactions in a bourgeois society can be reduced to sexual or financial transactions. In his interpretation of the play, sex is the strongest source of power, but he also shows that modern technology-based life has not brought any degree of enlightenment to western culture as the basic animal instinct of human beings are provocative. The characters emit a strange shriek that is symptomatic of this. While they fling themselves into the giant aquarium in the living room, that also connects the human and the animal world.

The image of the gun stands for violence which is created by women; even though violence originated in men, its legacy continues in both sexes. On the other hand, women have mostly been victims. Even today we cannot say that women use guns frequently to solve domestic or private problems. Ostermeier has rightly chosen the violent use of gun, because his purpose was to inflict shock on the audience. The gun, the image of power, has become the symbol of the twenty-first century when the whole world witnesses the violent aggressiveness across nations and countries. An empowered Nora visualized by a creative mind which is essentially male, must take hold of a gun. I am not entitled to call it "mad" or "bad", but one can nevertheless judge how such western productions influence the globalized cultural sphere that also affects the other parts of the world while I turn to the play *Resurrection*.

Nilu wrote in his note that his play breaks the illusion of reality as he intentionally avoided any sort of realism. Nonetheless, the realism that works within his dialectical process is the realism of a post-colonial and post-9/11 modern world. He juxtaposes Ibsen and his characters in an illusory world where colonialism and feminism struggle to be heard from within.

The mixture of English and Bangla in the play has been one of the major features which reminds of the "cultural contamination" that is one of the central cultural and political issues of the play. The characters' utterances in Bangla and English have exposed the contaminated cultural identity of the local audience. Moreover, they are engaged in a dialogue that touches the heart of the problematic meeting of the post-colonial and the culturally globalized modern world, which is interesting.

Ibsen as a character of this play tells Hedda Gabler why he made the three characters of his plays namely Nora, Rebeka, and Hedda commit suicide, "I needed to [kill you]. I freed you through death from the filthiness, narrowness, and pettiness that bound you" (my translation). He refers to Nora's departure as her death and says that in a doll's house only a doll can live, and Nora was a human being with intelligence and conscience. She had to leave that house. However, when he is engaged in a conversation with Nora, he changes his mind. Nora tells him, "Henrik Ibsen, you made me talk on behalf of all women and I said I am not a woman, I am a human being" (my translation). The next moment Ibsen represents Torvald and says in English, "first and foremost, you are a wife and a mother" (uttered in English).

Here Nilu presents the dualism existing in the lives of today's women, who have been given the opportunity to be educated, to earn a living wage, but who realize that nothing has changed. They are still living in a world of dominance and cruelty. Ibsen becomes the symbol of absolute authority of abuse whom the characters accuse.

I call the freedom of women a myth, because I have my own definition and interpretation of freedom in the third world countries. It is like Rousseau's utterance "man is born free but everywhere he is in chains." On Indian subcontinent the idea of women's freedom is a myth, as freedom for them does not really exist. I would cite one example of the popular goddess Durga whom the Indian Hindus call 'mother.' She was granted weapons by the gods, which are trident, discus, thunderbolt, etc. This beautiful image of the goddess could not change the lives of millions of Hindu women. Durga was created to fight an inhuman force that unleashed terror on earth. Except in the extremely entertaining Indian movies, one would rarely hear of a woman's defeating impropriety or immorality. Even today, many women are murdered because of dowry, burned by acid, abducted or otherwise openly humiliated. Freedom has become a good topic for public debate, and a popular catch phrase for gender activists. The women who dance with weapons in *Resurrection* recall the the dumb image of Durga, and I call them powerfully powerless.

Probably the writer and director Nilu never thought that the play would become a thin symbolic representation of the globalized third world whose authorities are the World Bank, IMF, and so on. The poor countries live on their will, and the imbalanced trade and cultural flow that are mostly dominated by the developed countries. The play reiterates the neo-colonial perspectives of today's uneven globalization, and the position of the third world countries is clear enough. The silent control of developed and strong countries over the underdeveloped and weak ones create existential fear. The rise of military power and religious fundamentalism have been the aftermath. In this situation if Irene and Rubek dance and sing, "I am free" and then Irene in military dress kills Rubek with a rifle, the political connotation becomes very clear. The tension involved in world politics, imbalance of power, the struggle within and without, all these are born out in the play. The unequal power game within a single landscape can be sensed. While the countries are entangled in a struggle between the economic dependence and the rise of militancy, the women suffer the most. The way the play uses gun is quite symptomatic of this struggle, but the handling of the weapons by women is far away from reality. I cannot avoid the recent phenomenon that can be called the darkest moment in the history of Bangladesh. The rebellion of the Bangladesh Rifles against the Army and the killing of about a hundred Army officials was a matter of serious national as well as international concern. However, the women who were killed or humiliated had nothing to do with the power struggle. In 1971 there were several female freedom fighters and many deflowered maids, but the play does not connote that, rather the way the women hold gun in *Resurrection* is a mere fantasy even today. It reminds of the thrillers or high action movies, but at the same time it should be acknowledged that what happens in the underdeveloped world today is nothing different. Nilu highlights the social situation and tells the untold story of political intrigue. The problem lays in the presentation of it and making women

scapegoats. It may seem to the traditional theatre audience that women's emancipation is either leaving the family or shooting the husband. The images of mothers, sisters, wives, or nurturing women—that are usually held sacred, are destroyed in such productions. Society still runs with those images of women, and women still work as silent partners in the development process. The one and all encompassing aggressive and vindictive woman's self gets way in these productions, which is partial, unrealistic, and abusive.

I want to emphasize like Patricia Klindienst that “In freeing our own voices we need not silence anyone else's or remain trapped by the mythic end. In undoing the mythical plot that makes men and women brutally vindictive enemies we are refusing to let violence overtake the work of our looms again. We have that power. We have that choice.”

[Note]

1. In this article, VDs of *Nora* and *Resurrection* have been consulted.

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