

**A pragmatic reading of Henrik Ibsen “*A Doll’s House*” and  
Alaa- Alaswani’s “*Yacoubian Building*”**

**A Research Submitted**

**By**

**Ahmad Hassanein Mustafa**

**Under Supervision of**

**Prof. Yehia Kamel El sayed youssif**

**Professor of English literature**

**Faculty of Arts, Suez Canal University**

**Dr. Mohamed Saeed**

**Lecturer of Linguistics**

**Faculty of Arts, Suez Canal University**

الملخص العربي:

يعد علم الدلالة هو الشغل الشاغل لكثير من الباحثين في الوقت الحالي حيث أنه اثبت فاعليته في التطبيق العملي على النصوص الأدبية. يقدم يول (١٩٩٦) العديد من التعريفات لعلم الدلالة التي تعتمد على سياق الموقف أو ما يسمى بالظروف المحيطة بالمنطوق. تتمثل مشكلة هذا البحث في القوي الناجمة عن استخدام الأدوات اللغوية الخاصة بالعملين الأدبيين عمارة يعقوبيان وبيت الدمية. اعتمد الباحث في هذا التحليل على نظرية أفعال الكلام الخاصة ب سيرل (١٩٧٩) ونظريه الادب الخاصة ب برون وليفنسون (١٩٨٧). ولذلك، يهدف هذا البحث الي شرح كيفية تأثير كل من أفعال الكلام واستراتيجيات الأدب على تأرجح القوي في علاقات الشخصيات المحورية هما نورا في مسرحية بيت الدمية وبثينة في رواية عمارة يعقوبيان. تكشف نتائج التحليل عن تطور في كل من الشخصيتين من الضعف الي القوي حيث كان هذا جليا في اختياراتهم اللغوية مع الشخصيات الهامة. بالإضافة لذلك، يميل كتاب العملين الأدبيين الي استخدام نفس الأدوات اللغوية لجذب اهتمام القارئ المتعمن لكشف رسائلهم وأفكارهم وآرائهم المخفية دون التعرض للسجن او الاضطهاد.

**Abstract:**

Nowadays, Pragmatics has become the main preoccupation of many researchers since it proves tremendous viability and practicability for analyzing literary texts. Yule (1996) introduces many definitions that reckon on the context of the situation or what is called the circumstances surrounding the utterance. The problem of the present study is how power is produced through using linguistic devices by both Henrik Ibsen and Alaa Al-Aswani. For the purpose of analysis, the researcher adopts Searle (1979) model of speech acts as well as Brown and Levinson (1987) model of politeness. Therefore, this research aims at revealing how Speech Act Theory and Politeness Strategies affect the fluctuation of power between the pivotal characters upon which the analysis is based, namely Busayna in *Yacoubian Building* and Nora in *A Doll's house*. The results of the analysis unravel how pivotal characters develop their personalities from weak to strong through the linguistic choices they utilize. In addition, the authors of both literary works use the same linguistic tools to convey their implicit ideas, messages, and perspectives without being arrested or persecuted.

**Keywords:** Pragmatics, Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory and Power relations.

### **Introduction:**

Within Al Aswani's "*Yacoubian Building*", Busayna is the oldest daughter of a poor family that lives in the huts on the roof of the Yacoubian Building. When her father died, she started earning money for her family by working at a clothing store. She is considered Taha's childhood sweetheart and wonders if their

relationship will perpetuate. Also, Taha's failure to be a police officer identifies the beginning of a growing rift between him and his beloved, Busayna. As she is more interested in money and means of comfort, she is affected by the spread corrupt conditions; in her case, the method men deal with women. She is sure that if she needs to keep her job stable, she must put up with the very undesired attentions of her employer. After getting repeatedly fired, she finally gives in and let the employer Talal rub up against her and play with her body. Therefore, this has awful impacts on her personality and outlook as she is overwhelmed by guilt but knows there is nothing she can do.

Likewise, within Ibsen's "*A Doll's House*", Nora Helmer, the primary protagonist of the story, is regarded as the wife of Thorvald and a mother of three children. She lives like a doll in a doll-house, and her character is considered a symbol for every oppressed woman who is restricted from living a free life. Within the very start of the events, Nora is regarded as rather a submissive, childish woman, who loves greatly being patronized, pampered and dealt like a defenseless animal. She seems glad and does not appeal to mind her husband calling her a "little featherbrain", "squirrel", "skylark" and other similar condescending nicknames. In the beginning, she appeals to enjoy the treatment Thorvald grants her. Nevertheless, along with this, one sees specific defiance, rebelliousness, and impulsiveness in her character which is crystal-clear at the end of the play.

Consequently, in this study, the researcher will select a lot of quotes and excerpts of dialogues as well as some utterances

occurred through the events of both Al-Aswani's "*Yacoubian Building*" and Ibsen's "*A Doll's House*". Linguistically, both speakers and hearers are usually helped in the process of interaction by the circumstances surrounding the utterance which are called speech events. Thus, the nature of speech events determines the interpretation of an utterance as performing a particular speech act (Renekema, 2018, P. 55). It is thought that directiveness is more tremendously used in *A Doll's House* than in *Yacoubian Building*. In addition to this, using accusations, disapproval, criticism, threats, and orders, in most cases, represent power and domination on the side of the speakers, in both works.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the similarities between the two literary works through highlighting the similarities between Nora and Busayna. These similarities unpack how both of them react, deal, and response in various situations. Here are the situations where both pivotal characters react in a similar way.

1. Busayna's Dignity and Nora's Challenge.
2. Busayna and Nora's Lack of Power.
3. Busayna's Act of Refusal and Nora's Act of refusal.
4. Busayna's and Nora's Polite request.
5. Busayna's Admiration of Taha's Look and Nora's Concern of her appearance.
6. Busayna's and Nora's kind speech.
7. Busayna's Lack of Power and Nora as A Doll's House.
8. Similar emotional acts between Busayna and Nora.

### **Busayna's Dignity and Nora's Challenge:**

Dignity is a formal reserve or seriousness of manner, appearance, or language, and challenge is a refusal to something as not being true, genuine, correct, or proper or to a person as not being correct, qualified, or approved. In Al Aswani's "*Yacoubian Building*", the following dialogue illustrates the effective power of Busayna to keep her dignity safe against harassment and playing with her body. In addition, Busayna's mother performs a directive speech act in the form of advice as she can continue working without losing her virginity which provokes her and is expected to induce face threatening act that threatens Busayna's positive face since she criticizes her for changing different jobs and the state of instability she lives and she says "***how can I look after myself when faced with a boss who opens his fly?***" in the wake of that. (Davies, 2004, p.42)

: أم بشينه: اخوتك في حاجه لكل قرش من عمملك والبنت الشاطرة تحافظ على نفسها وشغلها

(Al-aswani, 2003, p. 62) بشينه: كيف أحافظ على نفسي أمام صاحب شغل يفتح سرواله؟!

***Busayna's Mother: your brother and sisters need every penny you earn. A clever girl can look after herself and keep her job?***

***Busayna: how can I look after myself when faced with a boss who opens his fly?*** (Davies, 2004, p.42).

In a similar way, through Ibsen's "*A doll's House*", Nora is challenging Torvalds's statement which she is first and foremost a wife and mother. She lastly considers herself as a human being, equal to her husband, existing in her own right rather than existing only for the benefit of others. Nora has to find out her own truth and reinforce her own beliefs for herself. This realization motivates

her to make something more of her life, if society approves it or not. So, Nora's following words are significant in a dialogue:

*I don't believe that any longer, I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are – or at all events, that I must try and become one. I know quite well, Torvald, that most people would think you right, and that views of that kind are to be found in books; "But I can no longer content myself with what most people say or what's found in books". I must think over things for myself, and get to understand them.* (Act 3)

In the previous utterances, Nora performs a commissive speech act refusing to be as she used to be. By saying so, she represents power on her side conducting face threatening act that threatens Helmer's positive face as she expresses her disapproval to be as he wants.

Nevertheless, as someone enters deeper into the plot of the play, he/she makes sure that Nora is not as deceptive and selfish as she first appeals to be. In spite of her appealingly cunning nature, she also has a specific innocence and vulnerability. She is, actually, naïve and inexperienced concerning the outside world.

#### **Busayna and Nora's Lack of Power:**

Lack of power means lacking strength, ability, and authority. A person who does not have the power required to achieve something can be represented as powerless. The lack of power is represented in Al-Aswani's *Yacoubian Building* by Busayna. She has gone to the work for "Talal". Then, she asks him for giving her

20 pounds. Talal exploits the opportunity to flirt and harass her. The following dialogue is significant:

طلال: طلب من بثينة ان تصحبه الى المخزن  
 بثينة: نزلت مع "طلال المخزن وهي تستعيد كلمات أمها لها عن احتياجهم للمال.  
 بثينة: "أنا محتاجة عشرين جنيه من حضرتك  
 طلال: "لا كفايه عشره جنيه. تعالي ورايا اول ما ينشف فستانك

(Al-Aswani ,2003, p.65-66)

***Talal: he asked her to go with him to the store room.***

***Busayna: she followed him repeating to herself in her head her mother's words.***

***Busayna: I need 20 pounds from you, sir.***

***Talal: "nah, ten's enough. come back to the store after me as soon as your dress is dry. (Davies, 2004, p. 45)***

Here, Talal performs a directive speech act as he orders her to come to his safe place where he is used to practice his sexual purposes and harassment without any kind of reluctance on her side. Although he commits something she despises, she acquiesces to his desires due to her family's dire need of money. He conducts face threatening act that threatens her negative face through ordering her and restricting her personal freedom to get the money without being harassed. It is noted that directiveness is so much associated with impoliteness (Culpeper,1996). Consequently, she represents weakness on her side and strength of his.

In the modern era, power is practiced in a different method. In the 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was a formulation of a new mechanism of power possessed of highly particular empirical

techniques. This new technique of power is more dependent upon bodies. It is a mechanism of power that authorizes time and labor, instead of wealth and commodities. By means of inspection, power is continuously practiced. The common notion is that power is related to and practiced by agents and is practiced on agents.

Likewise, individuals find the same lack of power in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* through Nora's following dialogue:

***Nora: But, Mr. Krogstad, "I have no influence"!***

***Krogstad: Haven't you? I thought you said yourself just now***

—

***Nora: Naturally I did not mean you to put that construction on it. I! What should make you think I have any influence of that kind with my husband?***

***Krogstad: listen to me, I am prepared to fight for my small job in the bank as if I were fighting for my life*** (Act 1)

This exchange occurs between Nora and Krogstad after he asks Nora to support his position at the bank. Within the past, Nora bragged about using her influence to obtain a job for Mrs. Linde, so Krogstad expects she can do the same for him. Nora, nevertheless, is aware that she could never get Torvald to do something unless he wanted to do it himself. So, Nora's shock at anyone believes that she has any influence on Helmer. In the utterance "***I have no influence***", Nora performs a representative speech act as she claims that she is not strong enough to make Helmer changes his mind which, in return, expresses her weakness and leads to conduct face threatening act that threatens Krogstad positive face as she unfolds bad news and violent emotions to him. Consequently, his positive



face is negatively evaluated by her response. Moreover, in Krogstad's utterance "*listen to me, I am prepared to fight.....*", he performs a directive and commissive speech act at once. From one hand, he orders her to help him, and threatens her if she does not succumb to his demand by telling her husband the piercing fact regarding the money he lends her and the problem of forgery she commits.

### **Busayna's Act of Refusal and Nora's Act of Refusal:**

Taha asks Busayna to stop working for Zaki Pasha since he had a bad reputation. At that period of time, she becomes rebellious as she thinks that she is more powerful and insightful than him. Therefore, she exploits the situation to put an end to their relationship considering the growing gap between them due to their ambivalent interests. The following dialogue with him is significant:

طه: يا بشينه اتقى الله.. انتى انسانه طيبه..  
 بشينه: اسمع يا طه.. انا اقولك من الآخر.. حكايتنا خلصت على كده كل واحد يروح من سكه..  
 ومفيش داعى نشوف بعض تانى من فضلك.. دانت حتى بقيت ملتحي وملتزم وانا بلبس  
 قصير وعريان.. شكلنا مياليتش على بعض

(AL-Aswan ,2003, pp164-165)

**Taha: Busayna, fear god. You are a good person.**

**Busayna: listen, Taha. I'm telling you- bottom line, it's over between us. Each one goes his own way. And there's no call for us to meet again, if you don't mind.**" (Davies,2004, p.118).

In stating "*listen Taha ... the bottom line*" she performs a directive speech act as she orders him to break up their relationship since they are no longer be an item which, in return, represents

power on her side. Thus, she conducts face threatening act that threatens Taha's positive face as his face is negatively evaluated due to the expression of violent emotions and bad news for him.

In a similar way, through *A Doll's House*, Nora shares this idea of refusal when Dr. Rank confesses his love towards her when she intends to ask him for help by saying:

***DR.Rank: To have loved you as much as anyone else does? Was that horrid?"***

***Nora: No, but to go and tell me so. There was really no need- I can't tell you anything now.*** (Act 2) Exeditiously, Nora shut down and refuses to ask him for doing a favor, yet he is willing to help her without a second thought which indicates that she is a respectful woman who can't betray her husband, under no circumstances. In fact, he performs an expressive speech act as he expresses his love towards her. By saying so, he conducts face threatening act that threatens her positive face as she refuses to continue her conversation which, in return, denotes power and loyalty on her part.

### **Polite request of both Busayna and Nora**

بشئيه: انا طالبيه خدمه منك ممكن تعملهاالي؟

بشئيه: انا مقدمه للبنك الأهلي طلب قرض صغير. ١٠ آلاف جنيه. والمطلوب ضامن

***Busayna: I have a service to ask of you. Do you think you could do it for me?***

***Busayna: I'm applying to the Ahli bank for a small loan. Ten thousand pounds. They need a guarantor. (Davies ,2004, pp164-165)***

Here, she performs a representative with function of directive speech act which is indirect as she, somehow, requests him to be her guarantor. In addition, she conducts negative Politeness strategy as she tries to be polite in her request, which is clear in using the mitigating device “could you and please”.

ممکن تضمینى لو سمحت؟

(AL-Aswan ,2003, pp164-165)

***Could you please be my guarantor? (Request using mitigating devices).***

***(Davies, 2004. P.165).***

Likewise, in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House the following excerpt of dialogue is taken place between Nora and Torvald:

***Nora:( speaking quickly) you might give me money, Torvald. Only just as much as you can afford; and then one of these days I will buy something with it...Dear Torvald; please, please do! Then I will wrap it up in a beautiful gilt paper and hang it on the Christmas tree. Wouldn’t be fun?”***

(Act 1)

Here, Nora performs a directive speech act as she requests him politely to give her some money as a gift deploying some mitigating devices like “please, ***please, and might***”. Surprisingly, both Nora and Busayna deploy some mitigating devices for getting their needs.

**Busayna’s Admiration of Taha’s Look and Nora’s Concern of her Appearance:**

Before Taha goes to the interview character, Busayna shows admiration of his look, as following:

بشينة: كل هذه الاناقة

طه: انا ذاهب الان الي كشف الهيئة واحببت ان اراك

بشينة: ربنا معك (AL-Aswani ,2003, p.34)

**Busayna: "What a dandy!"**

**Taha: "I am going to the character interview and I wanted to see you."**

**Busayna: "the lord be with you". (Davies, 2004, p.22)**

In stating "**what a dandy!**" she performs an expressive speech act as she expresses her admiration towards him. Besides, she conducts positive Politeness as she exaggerates her approval to give him power and trust.

Likewise, in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, When Nora reveals to Mrs. Linde that she was the one who got the money for Torvald's trip to Italy, Mrs. Linde wonders how she could have borrowed money without her husband. The following quotation is significant:

**"I never said I had borrowed the money. I may have got it some other way. (Lies back on the sofa.) Perhaps I got it from some other admirer. When anyone is as attractive as I am – ". (ACT1)**

So, Nora heightens the drama of how she got the money intensifying her mystery. Her scenario proposing that she could have been given money by an admirer due to her looks that reveals how necessary appearances are to Nora. She performs a representative speech act as she claims that she got money due to

her beauty. Thus, she conducts positive Politeness as she exaggerates her admiration of her beauty and represents power on her side as a result.

### **Busayna's and Nora's kind speech:**

Kind speech is used by a speaker to placate hearers' violent and hard feelings and to reach the desired aims. Within *Yacoubian building*, after Taha has been rejected at the interview character of the police academy. She says the following utterance:

بشينه: والنبي ما تزعل نفسك يا طه  
 طه: انا زعلان على تعبي .. لو كانوا اشترطوا من الأول مهنة معينه للأب كنت عرفت .. كانوا قالوا  
 ممنوع أولاد البوابين.  
 (Al-Aswani ,2003, p.84).

***Busayna: "please don't upset yourself, Taha"***

***Taha: I am upset because all my wasted effort. If they'd set a particular profession for the father from the start, I would have known. They should have said "no children of doorkeepers". (Davies, 2004, p.59)***

In the previous utterance, Busayna tries to placate Taha's pain and sorrow through requesting him not to be sad in a form of a plea. By stating so, she performs a directive speech act as she requests him to stop being sad which indicates power on her side as she gives him her a hand to pull himself together. Thus, she conducts positive Politeness strategy as she expresses and exaggerates sympathy with Taha and tries to share his common ground by supporting him.

Likewise, in *A Doll's House*, Nora uses kind speech for a manipulative purpose and often plays dumb to get her way with her husband. When trying to convince Torvald not to dismiss Krogstad, she says ***“Your squirrel would run about and do all her tricks, if you would be nice and do what she wants” .... “Your skylark would chirp about in every room, with her song rising and falling.....I would play the fairy and dance for you in the moonlight, Torvald*** (Act 2)

In the last utterance, Nora performs commissive speech act as she, in an implicit way, promises him to do anything that pleases him and offers him convivial and harmonious atmosphere once he satisfies her needs pertaining Krogstad. It is worth mentioning that she also conducts expressive speech act as she expresses her gratitude and pleasure if he agrees to her demand. Apart from the result of this debate, Nora succeeds in manipulating the speech to suit her interest through stating lots of sweet and kind words such as: your squirrel, dance, and song etc....

### **Busayna's Lack of Power and Nora as A Doll's House:**

In Al-Aswani's *“Yacoubian Building”*, Busayna tells Taha that this country is not ours. The situation and her reaction express lack of power, as following:

بشينة تقول لظه: بص يا طه.. البلد دي مش بلدنا دي بلد اللي معه فلوس. لو معاك " عشرين " ألف جنيه ودفعتهم رشوه حد كان سالك عن شغله ابوك!؟

Al-Aswani (2003, pp.85-84).

***Busayna: “look, Taha. This country doesn't belong to us. It belongs to people who have money. If you'd have twenty thousand pounds and used them to bribe someone,***

***do you think anyone would have asked about your father's job?*** (Davies, 2004, p.59)

Here, she performs a representative speech act as she claims and depicts their financial state of living as their shortcomings. By saying so, she expresses weakness not only on her side but also on his accentuating the use of “us” since they came from the same weak level of living. Therefore, she conducts negative Politeness strategy stressing her pessimism.

Likewise, In *A Doll's House*, the lack of power is shown in Nora's following words:

***“When I lived with papa, he used to tell me what he thought about everything, so that I never had any opinions but his. And if I did have any of my own, I kept them quiet, because he wouldn't have liked them. He called me his little doll, and he played with me just the way I played with my dolls.”*** (ACT 3) (Jall, 2006)

From the preceding utterances, she performs expressive speech acts as she expresses her oppression and pain regarding how her father treats her. In addition, the repetition of the word “**doll**” embodies how pathetic, acquiescent, disempowered and marginalizes she used to be. The exact state she lives with Helmer. Consequently, she expresses weakness and compliance on her side. By saying so, it is clear that she conducts face threatening act that threatens Helmer's positive face as she expresses her disapproval and criticism towards being treated that way.

Within their final confrontation, Nora illustrates to Torvald that she compares the method Torvald treats her to the method her

father treated her. The truth that she was never able to think of herself as a child explaining why she is disgruntled with her relationship with Torvald. Nora has lived like a doll for her entire life, interested only in her appearance and entertaining others rather than bettering herself.

### **Similar emotional acts between Busayna and Nora:**

In *Yacoubian Building*, Busayna expresses her love towards Zaki El Desouky through the following utterance:

بشيتنه: يا عم ملاك متأسفه.. مش هقدر اعمل اللي اتفقنا عليه

(Al-Aswani, 2003, p.265).

In the utterance “**Mr. Malak. I'm sorry. I won't be able to do what we agreed on**”, she performs a commissive speech act as she refuses to do what he wants conveying absolute reluctance to betray zaki pasha as she truthfully loves him. Here, the linguistic transformation of her discourse is clear which, in return, expresses power on her side. Also, she conducts face saving act that emphasizes negative Politeness as being apologetic to save her words with Malak. That is to say, love makes graphic change.

In this last dialogue between the two, Busayna, once again, accentuates her refusal to be pliable to his demand. in fact, her indisposition to carry out Malak's request to get Zaki El-Dessouki's signature is clear-cut. These words show tremendous love on her side towards Zaki pasha.

أنا مش حاعملها كده - كده - آه!

(Davies, 2004, p. 188)

***I'm not going to do it – this is just how it is – yes.***



Through Busayna's interactions with Malak, individuals can see how she develops from a weaker young woman to a stronger one, doing what she believes to be right. Furthermore, power is previously fluctuated between them due to the fact that he knows her weakness point and focus on it to get his directives done, but in a way that seems to be more persuading and acceptable.

Likewise, in *A Doll's House*, the speech act is clear. Despite being forbidden from eating sweets, Nora eats macaroons without the knowledge of her husband, and even lies to him about it, saying ***"I wouldn't do anything that you don't like."*** (Act1) Here, she performs a commissive act as she promises him not to do anything he despises. Although she likes macaroon too much, she wouldn't like upsetting him. She conducts face saving act that emphasizes positive face as she tries to avoid disagreement under no circumstances.

### **Conclusion:**

The study highlights how the writers of both literary works succeed in exploiting or subjugating the same linguistic tools to convey their main ideas, and personal perspectives. In other words, both authors target the readers who have a critical way of thinking to analyze and understand what is written between the lines, and, here lies the significance of adopting the pragmatic analysis for the study in hand. Besides, the results reveal the points of similarities where the pivotal characters, along with the authors of the literary work, converge when interacting with various situations as unpacked in the aforementioned analysis. Succinctly, both Al-Aswani and Ibsen are bold and creative, addressing critical issues,

utilizing the same linguistic tools, targeting the same kinds of critical readers, using implicit meanings and hidden messages, facing huge resistance and unwelcoming wave. Furthermore, both pivotal characters, Busayna in *Yacoubian Building* and Nora in *A Doll's House*, are affected by the notion of lacking money and sacrifice. It can be noted that lacking money is the precursor of many problematic issues such as: sexual harassment, sacrificing poor beloved ones, and committing forgery. Accordingly, using specific linguistic devices e.g directives, commissives, and declarations can graphically represent power on speaker's side. Accordingly, directness is positively correlated with power and negatively correlated with Politeness, and here their relationships are crystal-clear.

### References

Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford university press.

Schubert, C., & Renkema, J. (2018). *Introduction to Discourse Studies*.

Searle, J. (1979). *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. Cambridge University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511609213>

Lall, R. (2006). Henrik Ibsen: *A Doll's House: A Critical Study*. Rama brothers India pvt.ltd.

---

Brown, P. & Levinson, S (1978) Universals in language usage: Politeness

Phenomena. In E Goody (ed.), *Questions and politeness: strategies in social interaction* (pp. 56-311). Cambridge University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use*. Cambridge University Press.

Al-Aswani, A. (2003). *Imaret Yacoubian* (4th ed.). Cairo: Maktabat Madbouly.

\_\_\_\_\_ (2004). *The Yacoubian Building*. H. Davies (trans.) Cairo: The American university in Cairo press.

Culpeper, J. (1996). Towards an Anatomy of Impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 25(3), 349-367