

**Women Empowerment  
in  
Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Marsha Norman's '*night,  
Mother***

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**Abstract:**

*Empowerment as a concept can broadly be defined as a medium fostering power in human relationships. It initiates individuals to gain control over their lives, thus effecting change in themselves which eventually extends to others. Through such self-empowerment, a character can face restrictions and maybe even remove them, gaining self-confidence in asserting themselves. Each of Ibsen's Nora and Norman's Jessie finds herself in an oppressed situation by her closest kin(s) that leads to the dehumanisation of the self. Coming from different ages, cultures and environments, each tries to assert her identity, individuality and autonomy by taking matters in her own hands, but through different means. There is an insistence to prove themselves in an unfair patriarchal world of powerful oppressive relationships. With reference to Simone de Beauvoir, this paper examines how the concept of empowerment works within those two female protagonists who strive to regain their humanity.*

**Keywords:** Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, Marsha Norman, '*night, Mother*, Simone de Beauvoir, empowerment, freedom, emancipation, feminism, identity, autonomy, individuality, masculinity, patriarchy, humanity, conventional morality

For ages throughout history, and mainly owing to their biological differences, women have been categorised as less than, or rather inferior, to men. Such categorisation extended to all aspects of life whether social, educational, economic, political or otherwise. They have mainly been dominated by patriarchy and denied any rights without their male counterparts which has resulted in discrimination between genders. They have been considered subordinates at home and in society, having no rights without males. As a result of such long sexist patriarchal domination, feminist movements have emerged in different parts of the world, specifically in the United States and Britain, advocating a radical change in the position of women in society. The call for women empowerment ensued as fundamental in addressing what they have regarded as patriarchal oppression. Because of their sex, women have struggled with established misconceptions that projected them as stereotypes of 'the Other' that Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex* 10) terms as perpetuated by men in her landmark work on feminist philosophy in the twentieth century, *The Second Sex*, published in 1949.

This study will portray the concept of women empowerment in relation to Beauvoir's feminist approach and links it to two main dramas, the nineteenth century Norwegian play, *A Doll's House* (1879), by Henrik Ibsen and the late twentieth century American one, *'night, Mother* (1981) by Marsha Norman. Despite the different cultures and the one century time span between those plays, yet the issue of patriarchy with its authoritative power over women's position in society is apparent in both ages, and women's reaction to it is exemplified, even if in different forms. The researcher will, therefore, give a brief exposition about feminism, then analyse the plays in light of Beauvoir's feminist approach, while exposing their similarities and differences.

Around the middle of the nineteenth century and onwards into the twentieth, various movements emerged. There were waves of feminism with manifold goals in the United States and Europe, calling for the emancipation of women from male domesticity and propagating their equal participation in the various aspects of life. In their varied outlooks, those waves have promoted certain ideas; the first wave advocating women's political suffrage and right to work, breaking from stereotypical labelling of women as reflected by men, while moving further through the second wave towards the essentiality of self-realisation, identifying their individuality and accentuating their parity with males in all spheres of difference. Views on the issue by Beauvoir (1908 – 1986), Betty Friedan (1921 – 2006), Kate Millet (b. 1943) along others, reaching to Julia Kristeva (b. 1941) emerged, struggling for equality in institutional power. However, it was Beauvoir's thought that inspired the second wave of feminism. In describing women's status in her above-mentioned work, she claims that women are inferior to men; that is, their situation affords them fewer possibilities" (*The Second Sex* xxiv), contending that "our societies are patriarchal and a woman must break the bonds in order to be herself as a human being" (125). In other words, rendered as such, women have to take a stand to confront male oppression, to mark themselves human beings equal to men instead of being regarded as an inferior second sex. As reverberated by Nichol (2015) in her analysis, to Beauvoir "[w]omen must resist the temptation to remain inferior by acting docile, complacent, or infantile" (4). Hence, struggling against the ideology that reveals them as submissive beings living in a domestically violent environment, women must strive to assert themselves in all aspects of their lives, whether internally or externally, in a society that subdues them and obstructs their actual potentials. They need to be empowered to liberate themselves and achieve autonomy.

In general, feminist thought necessitates the enhancement of empowerment towards action that affirms its actual reality. Research

literature includes several definitions of empowerment, just as feminism that has various currents. It is interesting to note that both concepts are correlated within certain contexts. In his article, “Studies in Empowerment: Introduction to the issue”, Rappaport introduces empowerment in one of the earliest definitions of the term as, “a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives” (3). He explicates it as a medium nurturing power in a relationship among people, initiating individuals to gain control over their lives, thus effecting change in themselves and eventually in others (3). Through self-empowerment, people can face restrictions and may even be able to overcome and remove them, gaining self-confidence in asserting themselves, their identity, dignity and individuality or, in other words, their autonomy. 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 ensues 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” (par. 14). 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 solid determination. This power change is eventually extended to those they come in contact with.

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, power and power relationships can change. Empowerment as a process of change, then, becomes a meaningful concept” (Page and Czuba, par. 4). Consequently, “gaining power”, according to Page and Czuba, “actually strengthens the power of others rather than diminishing it such as occurs with dominance/power” (par. 8). Mumby likewise declares that “empowerment is a process of acquiring power’, and is also intimately related to resistance, or the process of ‘refusing power’” (347); accordingly, its existence is within a power relationship in a human context. To Papa, et al, the term is “essentially a communicative process. Human interaction is necessary for empowerment to occur . . . [w]here a sense of personal control results from believing in one’s communication behaviour that can produce a desired impact on others” (91-92). It is therefore seen that empowerment assists people to gain power, and could help develop others for it is transmitted through relationships. People

getting in contact with empowered characters do get influenced, whether directly or indirectly, which initiates change in them as well.

Within the feminist framework, empowerment is embedded. Feminisms or Feminist movements uphold the alteration of women's status under any kind of dominance, particularly masculine. The western world history, specifically in the United States, France and Britain, has witnessed several currents of feminisms: liberal, Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, socialist, existentialist or post-modern. What they have in common is the refutation of women as occupying a lower position than men, best described in Beauvoir's term already mentioned, "the second sex", where woman is always the "Other" (*The Second Sex* 10). Men have always been regarded higher, whereas women have occupied a lower status. Such segregation has discriminated male and female genders in all roles in society. Male oppression has created conventional female stereotypes based upon their biological differences, thus assigning women mainly domestic roles totally different from men's.

Women have therefore had a long struggle to search 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 marginalised 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.

In the two plays under study, empowerment is exemplified along different routes. Each of Ibsen's Nora Helmer and Norman's Jessie Cates finds herself in an oppressive situation even by her closest kin(s), leading to the dehumanisation of the self. Written in different ages, cultures and environments, the heroine in each of them tries to assert her dignity, individuality and autonomy to take control over her own life by holding matters in her own hands, but through different means. Their plight is an insistence on exploring and finding themselves in an unfair world of oppressive power relationships between genders and even if, at some point, within the same gender and, subsequently, the concept of empowerment functions in the life of those two female protagonists who "struggle to recover their lost humanity (Freire 44).

In *A Doll's House*, Nora is a victim of patriarchy. She feels hurt from the male characters in the play who consider her as secondary, whether Krogstad who blackmails her, or Dr. Rank whose presence makes her uneasy, but the main figure is her husband, Torvald. In Act I, it is obvious how Torvald treats her like a child, giving her pet names, calling her with such appellations as “my little squirrel” (Ibsen 5) and “my sweet little skylark” (6), or when she pleads for money he describes her as “sweet little spendthrift” (6), “extravagant little person” (5) and “poor little girl” (7), to mention but a few. To him, she is a property equivalent to a doll that he seems to own in a toy house, and who just has to fulfil the fundamental role of a nineteenth century woman towards her home and family, while denying her the right of individuality. Social decorum dictates his male status as the breadwinner of the family and the wife’s role is to be dependent on him and mother his children. Nora is initially portrayed by Ibsen as a character with no authentic self, but a dependent wife according to the established social norms. Torvald’s patronizing character leads him to view her condescendingly as lesser than himself – the husband, the male or the dominant power. This is an obvious reason why her apparent happiness is superficial and unreal. The Christmas tree in the opening scene acts as an emblem for that ‘seeming’ felicity. That “little lark” (3) is constantly trying to please her husband while suffering and bleeding inwardly. This becomes apparent when she calls the maid to bring forth the Christmas tree on Krogstad’s departure after the latter’s blackmailing her that he would inform her husband of her past forgery. Ibsen portrays her inner torment in this scene in both stage directions and quick rhythmic speech tempo, while decorating the tree:

*(She gets them [her children] into the room by degrees and shuts the door on them; then sits down on the sofa, takes up a piece of needlework, and sews a few stitches, but soon stops.) No! (Throws down the work, gets up, goes to the hall door, and calls out.) Helen! bring the tree in. (Goes to the table on the left, opens a drawer, and stops again.) No, no! it is quite impossible! quite impossible! . . . (begins decorating the tree). A candle here – and flowers here – the horrible man! It’s all nonsense – there’s nothing wrong. The tree shall be marvellous! I will do everything I can to please you, Torvald! – I will sing for you, dance for you (26-27).*

Her life has been a subjected domestic one all through, merely existing in male-dominated households first with her father since the death of her

mother when Nora was very young, then surviving the same treatment by her husband after marriage.

Throughout the play, Nora gets what she desires only through her feminine physical charm that is opposed to Torvald's male superiority. Since the culture of the age stereotypically labels the female a secondary being and inferior as the weaker sex, then anything she irrationally does is expected of her as a woman void of male intellect, described by him as "the same little featherbrain!" (Ibsen I, 4). He never addresses her by her maiden name, never considers her an equal partner, but always judges her by the laws of masculinity. This status is reflected in what Beauvoir highlights in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, that women "can exercise their freedom, but only within the universe which has been set up before them, without them. . . . [T]hey can only submit to the law, the gods, the customs, and the truths created by males" (Bauvoir, *Ethics* 15), enforcing a male-structured hierarchy on women. She is judged by his standards, she is the one to abide by the current social standards and make sacrifices to sustain her life and marriage; otherwise, to conventional morality, she cannot provide for herself or be accepted in society. The end result is that she cannot have any role beyond placid domesticity. It is when an old friend of hers, Christine, now Mrs. Linde, confronts her with this reality calling her "a child" that the protagonist bursts out with the agony of all women: "You are like the others. They all think that I am incapable of anything really serious . . . that I have gone through nothing in this world of cares" (Ibsen I, 12). Such words reflect subdued independence echoing her inner struggle despite her apparent happiness as a wife.

The irony here resides in the reversal of man-woman power relationship as husband and wife. Staying silent for years, Nora has not mentioned to anyone the fact that she has saved Torvald's life from severe illness by reverting to forgery, the only solution available to her then. He would not have recovered without a one-year trip to Italy, the funds of which his wife supplied by signing her father's name at the bank one day after his death. When she unfolds this secret to Christine, the latter voices the same conventional morality that "a wife cannot borrow without her husband's consent" (Ibsen I, 13), which is rejected by the Nora. With her lack of education in not being well versed into the law, she presumes it unfair not to support her deed if the consequence is to rescue her husband and, hence, feels outrageous about it. However, and because of her dearth of autonomy, she is inherently satisfied to quench her thirst for independence and emancipation with the feeling that she had to provide for the family with needlework for that year and pay off her debt behind Torvald's back. She is envisioned here as a woman of an

inherent “independent spirit” that none around her notices, and which is “the hallmark of the feminist movements of different modes all throughout the world”, as Joseph elucidates (402-3); it is not of a “rebellious nature” (403), but of an individuality that needs to be accentuated. Her entire life depends on that secret bond that she neither can, nor will ever unfold, till she loses her physical charm and beauty.

Consequently, Nora reverts to rehearsing the tarantella with some training instructions from her husband, for the coming ball. Her dancing is extremely violent since she has been trying to detain Torvald from reading Krogstad’s blackmailing letter about her forgery, and her performance of it embodies the complexity of her whole being. That historical southern Italian folk dance, which depends on rapid movements that escalate in tempo and at the end of which women drop from exhaustion, is a projective symbol of Nora’s internal struggle as a scared woman who wants to vent her subdued self in the illusive life she is living with Torvald. While her movement heightens in violent steps and noise, he is displeased and leaves her to continue practising it alone. Her continuation in itself delineates her isolation within her own marriage where her womanhood is repressed, reflecting society’s enforcement of the role of the conventional housewife that is void of personality. As Østerud figures it, the tarantella actually “incarnates the world of Nora’s life, it expresses in intensified form the horizon of interpretation, the cosmos within which she lives” (157).

Unknowingly, that conversation with Christine brings forth the genie out of the bottle with the protagonist’s unfolding her innermost secret inherent in her struggle. Nora commences to realistically face her deluded self. At the end of Act I, Ibsen makes her appear pondering in terror: “Deprave my little children? Poison my home? . . . It’s not true. It can’t possibly be true” (Ibsen I, 30). Her struggle is apparent in her words and she undergoes a painful journey to maturity and liberation, for when Torvald learns that it was she – not her father’s funding, as she previously made him believe – who sustained him during his illness, he gets extremely disturbed. As Durbach remarks, Torvald’s “whole concept of himself has been shattered – a concept imposed on him by society. Ironically, he has unknowingly been the wife in the family” (122) which is a reversal of the male-female roles of the era. Nora’s act here as represented by Ibsen was revolutionary to a society that lived a double standard. A woman is always secondary by conventional standards, even if she performs an act of deliverance. This is clearly observed in Torvald’s reaction towards Nora, describing her as an unprincipled

“thoughtless woman” (Ibsen III, 62). His response is an exhibition of the double standard of morality in that male-oriented society to the extent that he cannot trust her anymore either with himself or his children. To him, the only remaining action is to save ‘appearances’ only to befit the accepted social norms:

[I]t must appear as if everything between us were just as before – but naturally only in the eyes of the world. You will still remain in my house, that is a matter of course. But I shall not allow you to bring up the children; I dare not trust them with you. ... From this moment happiness is not the question; all that concerns us is to save the remains, the fragments, the appearance. (63)

According to Berson, Nora discovers that “the boldless, most selfless thing she has ever done [causes] her undoing, and that her comfortable life is based on sham and moral hypocrisy” (par. 8). The perspective towards her sacrifice for her husband backfires on her, and she is viewed as erroneous against the social and cultural norms. The power she has begun to grope towards before now grows further enabling her to face reality and move towards her self-emancipation, which exhibits Ibsen’s protest against society’s unfair perspective towards women. To achieve autonomy, a woman needs to march towards freedom which was quite a radical outlook at the time. Such confrontation of power relation was extremely shocking for a middle-class woman to even consider going against the norm in an era of female subordination, let alone the thought of it; hence her outburst, “Never to see him again. Never! Never! – Never to see my children again either. Never again. Never! Never! – oh! The icy, black water – the bottomless depths – If only it were over! . . . Goodbye, Torvald and my children! (61).

The male-dominated morality is rigid; it is his name that a man cares for and a woman does not count. Despite his attempts to dissuade her and even find excuses for her forgery, the empowered Nora is adamant and acts in a revolutionary manner. For the first time, she faces her husband with the reality of their marriage. It is their very first serious talk as husband and wife, revealing the outcome of Nora’s struggle for personal autonomy; it is the moment of feminist empowerment into action:

You don’t understand me, and I have never understood you either – before tonight. No, you mustn’t interrupt me. You must simply listen to what I say. Torvald, this is a settling of accounts. ... Doesn’t it occur to you that this is the first time we two, you and I, Husband and wife, have had a serious



conversation? . . . we have never sat down in earnest together to try and get at the bottom of anything. (Ibsen III, 65-66)

This emphasis, as Ghafourinia and Jamili affirm, “is one of the key sentences in Feminist approach” (425). It is the moment of Nora’s explicit realisation of the grave situation, that she has been living in the house with everything pertaining to dolls, a “doll-wife” with doll children in continuation of being her father’s “doll-child” (Ibsen III, 66) without any difference, a mere second-hand being. It is at this point that her revolt against patriarchy is externally revealed, attaining the point of self-realisation. She assumes feminine power, gains agency and is determined on leaving her doll-house. She is in need of education to develop and continue searching for her own self, which cannot be achieved if she stays in the same place:

I must stand alone, if I am to understand myself and everything about me. It is for this reason that I cannot remain with you any longer. . . . I am going away from here now, at once. . . . I only know that it is necessary for me . . . I have other duties just as sacred . . . duties to myself. (67)

The moment of freedom has come to leave the private sphere assigned for women and set foot into the male-oriented public one. Nora needs to go out into the world to gain her independence and fight for her rights against society’s limitations. She is in dire need to assert her own individual identity, strive to become an authentic human being in her own right, to be an individual in and for herself through education. Ibsen here conveys the change in women’s position that has been dictated by the oppressive male shackles. She decides she can no longer stay or spend the night in a strange man’s house – as that is what Torvald has become to her. In other words, recovering from her disillusion in him, he has become a strange man to her and, as such, she can no longer accept to stay in the same house with him just for the sake of maintaining appearances and avoiding social scandal. Her slamming the door is enhanced by the need towards future potentials that women have been denied by society, and she “becomes another person altogether, sacred but tougher, more mature as she leaves her ‘dollhouse’ behind” (Berson par. 8). It is Torvald, the embodiment of masculinity, who currently needs to reflect on the result of his wife’s empowerment and its effect on their and his life, to probe within himself and discover – if ever – how his manpower has wronged her and shattered their marriage relationship, a reflection which is viewed as an utterly avant-garde notion in Ibsen’s age.

Though Ibsen has never clearly expressed he was a feminist, yet throughout the above analysis there is obvious indication that women’s position in society was a concern on his side through the revolutionary act

he made Nora perform. Nora heads towards the figure of a new woman in society, effecting radical change not only in herself but it is expected to influence other women in the future despite the fact that it was astounding back then. In her, the figure of Beauvoir's "Other" is intensified and her radical action heads towards the light of liberation, challenging the jungle of a cruel and sexist hierarchical world, and looking forward to becoming a better educated new woman. She believes education would be the best solution for her to free her from the infamous state society would see in her forgery and that it would also be saving her own children from committing an erroneous deed. Her final decision could best be described in Brooks' words, "she feels impelled to leave, and her decision is less an act of defiance against her husband and society than an attempt to save the lives of her children" (17).

Just like Nora's case in *A Doll's House*, men to Norman's Jessie in *'night, Mother* have been a source of pain. As has already been mentioned, though the time span between the production of both plays is a whole century where *'night, Mother* appeared at the end of the twentieth, yet the negative effect of the patriarchal social structure is similarly highlighted in both women protagonists. The difference, however, is in treading diverse routes in their struggle with it towards the attainment of what they regard as their deliverance, Nora in starting her education away from her married life, while Jessie adopts suicide. Whereas Ibsen's Nora reflects the problem of women's position as dictated by conventional values, Norman's Jessie conveys women's status striving towards wholeness from being subjugated under the power structure of patriarchy. Though the feminist movement slightly appeared in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century and was still groping at the beginning of the twentieth mainly towards political suffrage and the right to vote in its first wave of feminism, yet it began to take shape by the middle of the twentieth in the second wave or modern feminism, struggling to attain wholeness and autonomy in all fields. Referring again to Beauvoir, such structure is mirrored in *The Second Sex* as the author asserts the unfair segregation between genders:

humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. . . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other' (10).

To further elucidate, man, not woman, is ‘humanity’ itself, he is the human being and a woman comes next. Man is the all-powerful superior without whom a woman is nothing. He always comes first and she follows. As analysed above in *A Doll’s House*, Ibsen presents the female Nora as always secondary to her husband; she then decides to leave in order to change that secondary status and develop. Women protagonists in Norman’s plays struggle to attain self-determination, wholeness and autonomy by not being the “Other”. They are the vehicle through which the playwright’s feminist vision is conveyed. In *‘night, Mother*, Jessie, a middle-aged woman who has experienced a loveless marriage just like her mother’s, Thelma – or ‘Mama’, believes she has no self to the extent that her mere existence is painful to her. Together with Thelma, she suffers from a patriarchal world, the members of which never appear on the stage but who are only mentioned throughout the course of the play: a deceased father, a married brother, a husband who has deserted her and a criminal son. Despite the fact that Norman does not make any of them physically brought along the action, it is significant that their patriarchal effect is obvious. During this ninety-minute tragedy that includes only those two female characters, the audience learn that Jessie has suffered from epilepsy since her childhood – a fact that her mother has hidden from both husband and daughter. Unable to admit that Jessie’s fits have been inherited from her father who, Thelma suspects, suffered the same seizures, she has lied to him referring the cause to a fall off the horse.

The issue in question here is more complicated than Nora’s in *A Doll’s House*. It is not just masculine authority, but also its effect that is embodied in the mother’s dominance. Jessie is oppressed by all those around her and longs to be free from the inherent patriarchal influence that has resulted in her failure as a wife and mother, besides her own mother’s control over her life. Avoiding the issue of her daughter’s ailment as a child, Thelma’s domineering personality has led her to cover it up and even attempt to plot her life and marriage for her, which has led to the latter’s divorce. Strangely enough, it is as if Thelma’s dominance has entrapped them both together in the house without contact with society as well as not having any level of connectivity or intimacy whatsoever. Likely similar to the only already mentioned serious talk Nora has had with Helmer, Jessie and Thelma’s conversation, which covers the whole one-act play till the moment Jessie shoots herself, is their very first one they have ever had as communication.

During that conversation, Jessie learns some revealing facts about the reality of the incompetent relationship and lies between her parents. It is the truth that has never been voiced, but is a cause of pain for she had

some kind of slight understanding with her father but not her mother. Thelma even used to be jealous of Jessie for having some talks with her father when she herself could not communicate with him as her husband: “[y]ou had those quiet little conversations after supper every night. What were you whispering about? . . . I was jealous because you’d rather talk to him than anything” (Norman 48). The effect of her husband’s dominance still exists in Thelma’s consciousness to the extent that she cannot forget it. All she remembers is that “[h]e never said a word he didn’t have to, Jessie. That was probably all he’d said to me all day, Jessie” (46). Her struggle is massive as her marital relationship has been a failure by all means which has resulted in losing any proper relationship with her children, recalling, in some sense, Nora’s confused situations in *A Doll’s House*. Having had no stability in her loveless marriage, her only resort has been controlling her daughter’s own life as the only thing she could do to exercise some power of fake autonomy. Internal suffering has been reflected externally in the way she has wrongly handled her daughter’s life.

In such a house Jessie has been raised. Dominated by the effect of patriarchy, silenced or even forgotten because of her fits, she wishes to voice her inner psychological needs (Brown & Stevenson 184-185) as she considers herself a failure in everything in life, whether her work, marriage or raising her son. In an interview with DiGaetani, Norman emphasizes her belief that “women are socialized very differently from men, and that they are socialized to fail . . . We are a different tribe, we have different values than men. We solve problems in different ways, and we even disagree with men about what constitutes a problem, or a solution” (249), and this is what she portrays in her plays. Her protagonist here has been undermined not only by her parents, but also by her brother, Dawson, who has always interfered in her life, demeaning her individuality and leading her to continuously feel inferior. In describing to her mother what he does that bothers her, she states, “[h]e just calls me Jess like he knows who he’s talking to. He’s always wondering what I do all day. I mean, I wonder that myself, but it’s my day, so it’s mine to wonder about, not his” (Norman 23). She suffers from her mother’s control over her, living a negative psychological state of a neglected dehumanised self and, according to Brown, “struggles to achieve autonomy in connection, [to define herself] with integrity but in relation to others . . . these others are reduced to the child’s one essential other, Jessie’s mother” (62). She has nobody but Thelma, for everyone has left them and not one person pays them visits due to Jessie’s fits as Thelma tries to make her believe, though her daughter has not had any epileptic seizures for over a year now.

As revealed throughout their conversation, the protagonist intends, or is rather determined, to overcome it. At the beginning of the play Jessie calmly and passively informs her mother with her resolution to commit suicide that night, since she believes there is no meaning in her life. To her it is a decisive moment that would change her status completely. Searching for her father's gun in an old box, she cleans it, fools her brother to buy its bullets and loads it, thus preparing it for use. She has continuously felt wholly isolated from society, always kept at home because of her mother's fear lest anyone learns of her illness and so prevent her from getting a husband, to the extent that her marriage to her husband, Cecil, was her mother's plotting. She is confined without freedom or even the hope for a glimpse of it. The emptiness she lives suffocates her. Somehow, though contrasted, her plight echoes the first lines of Hamlet's famous soliloquy,

To be, or not to be – that is the question.  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them?

(Shakespeare III, i, 56-70)

The contrast here lies in Jessie's determination, not hesitation, to put an end to her life. She is not leading an illusive life, but her mind has been set on that suicidal decision since before the beginning of the play, which also makes the distinction between her and Nora. Nora's reaction is incremental from the first till the last act; she vents the innermost struggle she faces in Act I and which is heightened in her violent dancing of the tarantella in ACT II, till she announces to Torvald her decision to leave the house in the finale of Act III. On the other hand, Jessie has been ready with her decision, only awaiting the right moment to disclose it to her mother and calmly insists on committing it. To her, that moment is a triumphant emergence out of her status towards the freedom of the self while also, on another note, her decision forms a clear dissimilarity between her and her mother who vainly attempts to convince Jessie not to die and dissuades her by various means even to postpone her suicide for some time. Though there has been no actual relationship between them, now Thelma cannot imagine her life alone without her.

Finding no pleasure in life, she finds no pleasure or satisfaction in eating either, but ironically, throughout the course of the evening, she makes arrangements for her mother's future life after she commits suicide, whether through food provisions, daily life needs preparation, doing her mother's manicuring as part of every Saturday night ritual, instructing her what to do after hearing the gunshot and even preparing

for her the dress she would wear at the funeral. Jessie gives life to Thelma via her own death whereby her empowerment extends to her mother who will continue to live with a new awareness, aligning with Beauvoir's words "[t]o will oneself free is also to Will others free" (*Ethics* 31). As such, this is similar to the reversal of roles in the case of Nora and Helmer, for the same situation is also quite evident but between mother and daughter. The effect of patriarchal structure on Thelma's marital failure and lack of autonomy with her husband has led her to negatively practise it on her daughter. But now, it is apparent that the daughter has attained the mother's natural role. This reversed relationship is apparent in Jessie's attempts to have all things set for her mother "child", so the latter has a normal continuation of her daily life. However, Thelma would never be the same. The moment Jessie shoots herself and ends her life is a harsh beginning for Thelma's awareness. As Dwivedi reflects, "[t]he more loneliness that is exposed the more we realize the most horrifying aspect of *'night, Mother* is not Jessie's decision to end her life but her mother's gradual awakening" after the shock (9). She has been unable to comprehend or grasp her daughter's very personal decision to commit suicide but now, at the very last minute before Jessie shoots herself in her locked room, Thelma reiterates, "I didn't know! I was here with you all the time. How could I know you were so alone?" (Norman 88). Her last words ending the play denote signs of a change in her attitude when she dials her son's number to inform him of Jessie's suicide, calmly asking his wife, "Loretta, let me talk to Dawson, honey" (89).

That evening, Jessie's wish is not to have any masculine figure around. It is a sacred moment for her when patriarchy is not represented, but just her mother and herself. She refuses to have her brother summoned by Thelma and tells her, "If you call him, I'll just have to do it before he gets here. Soon as you hang up the phone, I'll just walk into the bedroom and lock the door. Dawson will get here just in time to help you clean up" (Norman 16). Jessie's empowerment and sense of self-encouragement is clear in her calmly said words at the beginning of the play, "I think I can kill myself, Mama" (17); nothing can refrain her for her mind is set. She prepares her towels to make it easy for her mother to clean up. She irons Thelma's dress for the funeral and even gets her ready for the moment after the shot. Even though the medication has helped her not to have any seizures for the past year (the reason which Mama thought was the cause behind her daughter's decision), yet Jessie views matters differently. When Thelma authoritatively affirms "I won't let you", the answer is just like Nora's clear-cut 'No': "It is not up to you" (27). Her mother's grip over her is over; it is not for Thelma to decide for

her daughter any more, but for once in her life, Jessie insists that it be hers. That sense of determination is what has been seen in Nora's slamming the door towards the goal of becoming a newly developed and different woman altogether.

Paradoxically, Nora's and Jessie's decisions reveal two similar but contrasted endings at the same time. Nora will start a new life that might be hard and painful to reach the maturity of a new woman, whereas Jessie's suicide, which she is content to view as the moment at which she gains control over herself and the world, physically ends it. Jessie is ready for the act as her only right towards emancipation and Norman defends that, admitting, "I do feel people have a right to control their lives, even the end of their lives, if they can" (DiGaetani 250), yet it is not a new life for Jessie in the world any more. The protagonist believes she asserts autonomy over her life by taking the resolution to terminate it. To her, it is the culmination of her triumphant moment of empowerment and self-attainment as Dwivedi comments, "Jessie's suicide becomes an ultimate act of existential definition of self; it is something she does not have to do, but what she chooses to do just the same" (8). Her development has been in the ability to decide, be comfortable with her decision and fulfill it, even in death. To her, it is the moment of feminine freedom from the influence of the surrounding patriarchal world and never becoming the "Other".

In her feminist theatre, Norman succeeds in bringing women to centre stage, exploring their predicament as women. Her protagonist is empowered in search for her identity and lost self and, finding it, helps her own mother discover herself too or, at least, helps awaken her to reality. Mama now needs to shake off the effects of patriarchy and start thinking differently. The setting – Thelma's house with the clock on the wall constantly presenting the passage of time towards the expected suicide and intentionally set by Norman to coincide with the actual performance timing of the play – is both a restricting actuality and a restraining reality. Only one door is presented on stage, that one to Jessie's bedroom. To Thelma, it leads to the void or the expected nothingness of death of which she herself is scared. Now that she believes she has just commenced a relationship with her daughter, she does not want to lose her. Contrariwise, it represents the opposite to her daughter. The mother cannot simply understand why her daughter wishes to die; she cannot visualise the autonomy and individualism of a cohesive self, which is Jessie's role towards her before the time comes to enter her bedroom and shoot herself. Jessie is in control and would never let go of her attained individuality. She startles Mama by stating,

I can't do anything either, about my life, to change it, make it better, make me feel better about it. Like it better, make it work. But I can stop it. Shut it down, turn it off like the radio when there's nothing on I want to listen to. It's all I really have that belongs to me and I'm going to say what happens to it. And it's going to stop. And I'm going to stop it. So. Let's just have a good time. (Norman 36)

Before the moment Jessie has decided to be the turning point to shoot herself, she is very determined and adamant, just like Nora. When Thelma remarks they could have more talks like that night, that they have come to communicate in a relationship that has been missing all along, she firmly responds,

No, Mama! We wouldn't have more talks like tonight, because it's this next part that's made this last part so good, Mama. No, Mama. *This* is how I have my say. This is how I say what I thought about it *all* and I say no. To Dawson and Loretta and the Red Chinese and epilepsy and Ricky and Cecil and you. And me. And hope. I say no! just let me go easy, Mama. (Norman 75)

Jessie has the upper hand now and takes full control of her life through deciding to end it. Her suicide, as Browder asserts, "is the lens through which she offers a view of her existence, an existence so fraught with detachment and boredom that she chooses to continue meticulously in the tedious business of it, day-to-day routine until that moment when she shuts it off" (109-110). When the decisive moment to commit suicide arrives, nothing will detain her. She whispers her last "'night, Mother", vanishes into her room and locks the door while Mama screams out. The door leading to nothingness in Jessie's life has become the outlet to her vision of freedom. The audience then hear the shot while Mama collapses, crying against the door.

At that point, Thelma will have to face the reality of losing Jessie forever. The moment of their initial connectedness ends up to be the moment of their separation. All she thinks she has had or owned is merely nothing but her daughter's body at the moment; it is the only thing left for her to identify as hers. It is the realisation that Jessie has never been 'a' property but a human being, "Jessie, Jessie, child . . . forgive me . . . I thought you were mine" (Norman 89). That night is the one in which both mother and daughter sit together and communicate, despite the tension accompanying it on Thelma's side. It is a paradox in itself, for the only time they seem to come closer in real contact is the time that physically separates them. As Kane confirms, that "private night of conversation . . . is a necessary prelude to suicide, bringing together and tearing apart a



mother and daughter whose relationship has been more intimate in name than in fact” (267). Facing that ending, Thelma’s future will never be the same after Jessie is gone. The whole situation raises her awareness to the fact that “it is a conclusion that asserts one’s own right to control one’s life even to the point of suicide” (Gussow 2). Jessie’s death is the moment of change as the effect of her own empowerment on Thelma.

In conclusion, in such a process of power relationships, the plight of both female protagonists is the path towards emancipation but through different methods. In the light of Beauvoir’s philosophy, through being empowered, Nora and Jessie attain their liberation from the oppression of their patriarchal communities, one through slamming the door on her previous life and going out into the world to educate herself while the other, paradoxically, finds herself in death as her moment of deliverance. Each decides on her own method of reaching self-development. It is not the issue if needs are met or not, but it is knowing how to meet them that embodies empowerment. They are both determined to assert their individuality whatever the cost may be, even if it means leaving home and the family in Nora’s case, or committing suicide in Jessie’s. Within such analysis, what Herrick refers to as people’s empowerment clearly befits those women in that context so that in effect, they “can collectively explore the real commitments that define their lives as human beings, and create a vision of self-actualization in their social environment: a new way of expressing what our world is, who we are, and what we ought to be. Toward emancipation from what exists, such a vision needs to be based on moral ideals” (2).

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