



Economic Dependence and Patriarchal Marriage in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*

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Abstract: Henrik Ibsen's domestic dramas critically expose the structural oppression embedded within nineteenth-century patriarchal marriage. This article examines the relationship between economic dependence and female subordination in *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, arguing that Ibsen presents marriage not merely as an emotional institution but as an economic and ideological structure that limits women's autonomy and individuality. Through the characters of Nora Helmer and Mrs. Alving, Ibsen dramatises two distinct responses to patriarchal oppression: rebellion and endurance. Drawing upon Marxist feminism, Simone de Beauvoir's theory of "the Other," and Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary social structures, this paper analyses how women's financial dependence reinforces patriarchal authority while simultaneously shaping female identity, morality, and motherhood. The article further situates the plays within the socio-economic and legal conditions of nineteenth-century Norway, where women's legal and financial rights remained severely restricted. By comparing Nora's decision to leave domestic confinement with Mrs. Alving's prolonged sacrifice within marriage, the paper demonstrates how patriarchal society transforms women into symbolic and economic dependents whose individuality is subordinated to social respectability and masculine authority.

Keywords: Henrik Ibsen, patriarchy, economic dependence, Marxist feminism, domesticity, gender roles, nineteenth-century Norway, female agency.

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Introduction

Henrik Ibsen occupies a crucial position in the history of modern drama because of his uncompromising portrayal of middle-class domestic life and his critique of social hypocrisy. Often referred to as the “father of realism,” Ibsen revolutionised theatre by moving away from melodramatic spectacle and focusing instead on psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, and social contradictions. His plays repeatedly interrogate the structures governing marriage, morality, gender, and authority. Among his most significant contributions to modern drama are *A Doll’s House* and *Ghosts*, two plays that examine the oppressive consequences of patriarchal marriage upon women.

In nineteenth-century Europe, women were largely confined to the domestic sphere and were economically dependent upon fathers or husbands. Victorian ideals promoted the image of the obedient wife whose identity revolved around sacrifice, motherhood, and emotional service to men. Coventry Patmore’s famous poem *The Angel in the House*, idealised women as selfless figures whose highest virtue was submission to masculine authority. Such ideological constructions reduced women to domestic caretakers while denying them individuality, autonomy, and financial independence.

The social and legal conditions of nineteenth-century Norway reinforced these patriarchal norms. Married women possessed limited legal rights and were economically dependent upon their husbands. Women could neither freely access property nor independently participate in financial matters without male approval. Consequently, marriage functioned not only as an emotional institution but also as an economic structure in which masculine authority was legitimised through financial control.

Within this context, Ibsen’s plays become radical critiques of patriarchal domesticity. In *A Doll’s House*, Nora Helmer initially appears as a cheerful and submissive wife who conforms to her husband’s expectations. However, her secret financial labour and eventual rejection of domestic confinement expose the inequality hidden beneath middle-class respectability. In *Ghosts*, Mrs. Alving represents another dimension of patriarchal suffering. Unlike Nora, she remains trapped within marriage and social duty for years, sacrificing her desires and individuality to preserve social appearance and protect her son.

This article argues that Ibsen critiques patriarchal marriage by demonstrating how women’s economic dependence transforms conjugal life into a structure of psychological and moral subordination. Through Nora and Mrs. Alving, Ibsen presents two distinct responses to patriarchal oppression: rebellion and endurance. Using Marxist feminist theory, Simone de Beauvoir’s notion of woman as “the Other,” and Michel Foucault’s concept of disciplinary social structures, this paper



analyses how economic dependence shapes female identity, motherhood, morality, and agency within patriarchal society.

Literature Review

Feminist criticism of Ibsen has extensively explored the representation of women's oppression within domestic and social institutions. Early critical discussions frequently interpreted *A Doll's House* as a feminist text advocating women's emancipation. Critics such as Toril Moi argue that Nora's departure at the end of the play symbolises a rejection of patriarchal ideology and an assertion of female subjectivity. Nora's famous declaration that she is "first and foremost a human being" reflects her awakening to individuality beyond socially constructed gender roles.

Marxist feminist scholars have further examined the economic foundations of gender oppression in Ibsen's plays. Friedrich Engels, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, argues that patriarchal family structures emerge through systems of property and inheritance, making women economically dependent upon men. This perspective becomes particularly relevant in Ibsen's domestic dramas, where financial authority functions as a mechanism of masculine control.

Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "the Other" provides another important framework for understanding Ibsen's female characters. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that patriarchal society constructs man as the normative subject while woman exists merely in relation to him. Nora's identity as Torvald's "little squirrel" and Mrs. Alving's role as the dutiful wife illustrate this reduction of women into secondary beings defined by masculine expectations.

Scholars influenced by Michel Foucault have also analysed domestic institutions as disciplinary spaces regulating female behaviour and morality. The middle-class household in Ibsen's plays operates as a surveillance structure in which women are expected to internalise patriarchal values and perform socially acceptable femininity.

Although substantial scholarship exists on feminism in Ibsen, many studies focus primarily upon moral emancipation and individual freedom. Comparatively fewer analyses foreground economic dependence as the structural foundation of patriarchal control. This article seeks to bridge that gap by examining how financial authority shapes emotional relationships, social morality, and female identity in *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*.



Patriarchal Marriage and Economic Dependence in *A Doll's House*

In *A Doll's House*, patriarchal authority is deeply intertwined with financial control. Torvald Helmer's relationship with Nora is structured through economic dominance, paternal language, and emotional infantilisation. Although Nora initially appears playful and carefree, the domestic atmosphere of the Helmer household conceals an unequal power structure in which Torvald occupies the position of authority while Nora remains economically dependent.

Torvald repeatedly addresses Nora using diminutive pet names such as "little squirrel," "songbird," and "featherbrain." These expressions are not merely affectionate but ideologically significant. Torvald infantilises and objectifies Nora, and makes her an object in the domestic world. The language reduces Nora to a decorative and childlike object whose value lies in entertaining her husband. Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "the Other" becomes particularly relevant here, as Nora exists primarily in relation to Torvald's desires and authority. Torvald assumes the role of rational provider while Nora is denied intellectual and financial agency.

Money becomes one of the central symbols of patriarchal power within the play. Torvald frequently criticises Nora's spending habits and associates financial irresponsibility with femininity. His insistence upon controlling household expenditure reflects a broader patriarchal belief that women are incapable of rational economic management. Ironically, Torvald's authority depends upon Nora's concealed financial labour. Nora secretly borrows money from Krogstad and forges her father's signature in order to finance Torvald's medical treatment in Italy. Her action directly challenges patriarchal legal and social structures because she enters the financial sphere independently.

The forgery becomes symbolically important because it destabilises masculine authority. Nora performs a task reserved for men within nineteenth-century society: she becomes an economic agent. Yet patriarchal law criminalises her attempt at independent action. Krogstad's statement that motives are irrelevant to legal judgment exposes the rigidity of patriarchal morality. Nora's act, though motivated by love and sacrifice, is treated as a legal transgression because it violates masculine economic authority.

The play further reveals the double standards governing domestic expenditure. Torvald rebukes Nora for spending money on household pleasures while he casually purchases expensive wine for social entertainment. Such moments expose the gendered distinction between masculine consumption and feminine "wastefulness." Nora's needs are trivialised because patriarchal domesticity prioritises masculine pleasure and authority over female autonomy.



Nora's gradual awakening occurs through the collapse of her idealised image of marriage. She initially believes that Torvald will defend her when the truth emerges. Instead, his reaction exposes the selfishness underlying patriarchal respectability. Torvald fears social humiliation more than Nora's suffering. His concern centres upon reputation, public morality, and masculine authority rather than emotional understanding.

At this moment, Nora realises that her marriage has functioned as a performance rather than an equal partnership. She compares herself to a "doll-wife," first controlled by her father and then by her husband. Nora's realisation that she has existed merely as "your doll-wife" reveals the reduction of women into performative domestic objects within patriarchal marriage. Through this metaphor, Ibsen exposes how feminine identity is constructed according to masculine expectations rather than individual autonomy. The metaphor of the doll is central to the play because it captures the objectification of women within patriarchal domesticity. Nora has been shaped, disciplined, and displayed according to masculine expectations while her individuality remained suppressed.

The tarantella scene further dramatises Nora's position within patriarchal spectacle. Torvald instructs and observes her performance, turning her body into an object of visual pleasure and control. The dance symbolises Nora's entrapment within performative femininity, where female identity is constructed through masculine observation and approval.

Ultimately, Nora's decision to leave the household represents a radical rejection of patriarchal ideology. She realizes that her "home has never been anything other than a play-house" (Ibsen 183). Her famous declaration that she must educate herself before fulfilling the roles of wife and mother signifies a transition from objecthood to subjectivity: "I believe I am first and foremost a human being..." (Ibsen 184). The final door slam symbolises not merely domestic departure but the collapse of patriarchal illusion. Nora refuses to remain economically, emotionally, and intellectually dependent upon masculine authority.

Domestic Entrapment and Maternal Anxiety in *Ghosts*

While Nora ultimately escapes domestic confinement, Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts* represents the devastating consequences of prolonged endurance within patriarchal marriage. The play examines how social morality, religious ideology, and family respectability imprison women within destructive relationships.

The title *Ghosts* itself functions symbolically. The "ghosts" are not supernatural beings but inherited ideologies, social conventions, and suppressed traumas that continue to shape the present:



It's all kinds of old dead opinions and all sorts of old dead doctrines and so on. They aren't alive in us; but they are lodged in there all the same, and we can never be rid of them." (Ibsen 227)

Mrs. Alving remains haunted by the moral corruption of her late husband and by the patriarchal values that forced her to remain within marriage.

Unlike Nora, Mrs. Alving once attempted to leave her husband. However, Pastor Manders persuaded her to return, emphasising her duties as wife and mother. Manders represents institutional patriarchy disguised as morality and religion. His insistence upon social reputation reveals how patriarchal society disciplines women through moral guilt.

Mrs. Alving's tragedy emerges from her prolonged self-sacrifice. She spends years concealing her husband's debauchery in order to preserve social respectability and protect her son, Oswald. The orphanage she establishes symbolises her attempt to erase the memory of Captain Alving and purify the family's reputation. Yet the destruction of the orphanage by fire signifies the collapse of these illusions.

Oswald's inherited disease becomes one of the most powerful symbols in the play. The illness represents the transmission of patriarchal corruption across generations. Mrs. Alving's fear that her husband's "ghost" lives within her son becomes horrifyingly real, "the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children" (Ibsen 238). Patriarchal violence is shown not merely as emotional oppression but as a hereditary social disease affecting future generations.

The relationship between Mrs. Alving and Oswald also reflects the destructive consequences of maternal sacrifice. Despite dedicating her life to protecting him, Mrs. Alving ultimately fails to save her son from inherited suffering. Her identity as wife and mother becomes fragmented under the pressure of patriarchal morality.

Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary social structures illuminates Mrs. Alving's psychological condition. Patriarchal ideology becomes internalised to such an extent that women regulate themselves through guilt, fear, and social obligation. Mrs. Alving suppresses her desires and emotions for years because society conditions women to prioritise duty over individuality.

The play also critiques the hypocrisy of respectable society. Captain Alving's public reputation remains intact despite his moral corruption, whereas Mrs. Alving faces judgment for attempting to resist patriarchal domesticity. Ibsen thereby exposes how patriarchal morality protects masculine authority while policing female behaviour.



Unlike Nora's decisive rebellion, Mrs. Alving's resistance remains partial and tragic. She gains intellectual awareness too late to escape the consequences of patriarchal oppression. Her suffering reveals the long-term psychological devastation caused by economic dependence, social conformity, and moral repression.

Marxist Feminist Perspectives on Marriage and Domesticity

Marxist feminism provides an important framework for understanding the economic structures underlying gender oppression in Ibsen's plays. Marxist feminists argue that women's oppression is closely linked to capitalist systems that depend upon unpaid domestic labour and female economic dependence.

In a patriarchal society, men dominate the public sphere of paid labour while women are confined to unpaid domestic work. Household labour, childcare, and emotional care reproduce the labour force without economic recognition. Consequently, women's domestic work becomes invisible despite sustaining social and economic systems.

Engels argues that the emergence of private property transformed the family into an institution of economic control. Women became dependent upon men because property inheritance required the regulation of female sexuality and domestic behaviour. Marriage therefore functioned as both a social and economic arrangement.

This framework is highly relevant to *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*. Nora's financial dependence upon Torvald allows him to dominate the household emotionally and morally. Although Nora secretly contributes economically through labour and debt repayment, her work remains hidden because patriarchal society refuses to recognise female financial agency. Similarly, Mrs. Alving's inability to leave her husband permanently reflects the economic and social limitations imposed upon married women. Even after Captain Alving's death, she remains psychologically trapped within the structures of patriarchal respectability.

The plays also reveal how women are valued according to their domestic functions. Nora is expected to entertain, nurture, and obey. Mrs. Alving is expected to preserve family honour and maternal sacrifice. Female identity becomes inseparable from service to patriarchal family structures. At the same time, Ibsen exposes the contradictions within bourgeois domesticity. The middle-class household appears respectable and stable, yet beneath this surface exist repression, secrecy, emotional violence, and inequality. Patriarchal marriage becomes a site of ideological performance where women are compelled to maintain appearances at the expense of individuality.



Women and Economic Conditions in Nineteenth-Century Norway

The socio-economic conditions of nineteenth-century Norway provide a crucial context for understanding Ibsen's plays. During this period, women possessed limited legal and economic rights. Married women remained under the guardianship of their husbands and lacked financial independence.

The Crafts Act of 1839 and the Trade Act of 1842 gradually allowed some unmarried women to participate in trade and small-scale economic activity. However, these reforms were limited and did not fundamentally challenge patriarchal economic structures. Married women continued to face legal restrictions concerning property ownership, financial transactions, and political participation.

Women's participation in the workforce was largely confined to agricultural labour, domestic service, and low-paid occupations. Middle-class women were expected to remain within the domestic sphere and depend economically upon fathers or husbands. Consequently, marriage became a necessary institution for social and financial survival.

These historical realities directly inform Ibsen's representation of women. Nora's inability to borrow money legally without male consent reflects actual legal restrictions upon married women in nineteenth-century Norway. Her forgery becomes both a personal act of desperation and a critique of patriarchal law. Similarly, Mrs. Alving's social entrapment reflects the limited possibilities available to women seeking independence from marriage. Divorce carried social stigma, and women who challenged patriarchal domesticity risked isolation and moral condemnation.

The feminist movements emerging in Europe during the late nineteenth century gradually challenged these inequalities. Women increasingly demanded access to education, property rights, employment, and political participation. Ibsen's plays anticipate many of these debates by exposing the contradictions between social respectability and female oppression.

Comparative Analysis: Nora and Mrs. Alving

Although Nora and Mrs. Alving experience similar patriarchal structures, their responses to oppression differ significantly. Nora ultimately rejects domestic confinement through departure, whereas Mrs. Alving remains trapped within sacrifice and endurance.

Nora represents a movement toward self-discovery and individual emancipation. Her departure signifies the rejection of socially imposed femininity and economic dependence. She chooses uncertainty over submission and prioritises selfhood over social approval. Mrs. Alving, however, internalises the ideology of duty for much of her life. Even when she recognises the



corruption of patriarchal morality, she remains psychologically haunted by social expectations. Her resistance emerges through confession and intellectual awareness rather than physical escape.

The two characters also differ in their relationship with motherhood. Nora leaves her children because she believes she must first understand herself as an individual before becoming a responsible mother. Mrs. Alving sacrifices her entire life for maternal duty, yet her efforts fail to protect Oswald from inherited suffering. Symbolically, Nora's narrative ends with movement and possibility, whereas Mrs. Alving's ends with paralysis and despair. Nora opens the future; Mrs. Alving remains trapped within the ghosts of the past.

Yet both women reveal the destructive consequences of patriarchal domesticity. Ibsen demonstrates that marriage based upon economic inequality and gender hierarchy inevitably suppresses female individuality.

Conclusion

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* offer profound critiques of patriarchal marriage and women's economic dependence in nineteenth-century society. Through Nora Helmer and Mrs. Alving, Ibsen reveals how domestic institutions operate as structures of ideological, emotional, and financial control.

Nora's transformation from submissive wife to self-aware individual exposes the instability of patriarchal domesticity. Her rejection of marriage represents a demand for subjectivity and human dignity beyond socially imposed gender roles. Mrs. Alving's tragic endurance, on the other hand, illustrates the devastating psychological consequences of prolonged self-sacrifice within patriarchal structures.

Using Marxist feminist perspectives, Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "the Other," and Foucault's understanding of disciplinary power, this article demonstrates that economic dependence forms the structural foundation of women's oppression in Ibsen's plays. Patriarchal authority is sustained not only through morality and social expectations but also through financial control and legal inequality.

Ibsen's critique remains deeply relevant because the relationship between gender and economic power continues to shape modern social structures. His plays reveal that female emancipation requires more than emotional freedom; it demands economic autonomy, intellectual independence, and the dismantling of patriarchal systems that reduce women to objects of domestic service and social respectability.



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