Sketching Women: A Corpus-Based Study of Female Protagonist in *A Doll’s House*

**Abstract:**

The current study is a corpus-based analysis of the adjectives used for the female protagonist, Nora, in the play *A Doll’s House* written by Henrik Ibsen. It was published on 4 December 1879 and performed for the very first time in December 1879. The play was very controversial, and the controversy was centered on Nora’s decision to leave her children without any intention of returning, but she soon realized that her children needed more of their mother than her freedom. According to Ibsen, it was more appropriate for women to be wives and mothers. Ibsen was not a proponent of women’s rights, but he was dealing with the issue of women’s rights as an aspect of realism in this play. He did not intend to resolve the issue, but only shed light on the issue of women’s rights. Ibsen depicted Nora, illustrating women’s issues realistically. Through the portrayal of Nora, Ibsen sought to portray the real world, specifically the status of a woman in his society. In this play, Nora was treated as a child by other characters in the play, especially her husband. The play is considered to be representative of Norwegian society. It presents the predicament of women by presenting the case of Nora, the main female character in the play, *A Doll’s House*.

The current study explores the use of words in the description of Nora, the central character of the play, *A Doll’s House*. Language in any discourse plays a paramount role in depicting cultural, social, religious, and economic divides. The gender divide presented in the play by Henrik Ibsen is considered to be one of the primary issues concerning his time. He, with the appropriate use of language, has presented the case of Nora, a Norwegian woman who suffers because of the male-dominated society. This study was carried out by examining the character of Nora, the leading protagonists in the play, to see how women were treated in Norwegian society when this play was written. This study involves the concept of corpus analysis in which the corpus of the play *A Doll’s House* was analyzed focusing on adjectives used by Henrik Ibsen to represent women. Adjectives are considered to play a central role in the description of characters in any piece of writing. Adjectives used to describe nouns and

**Key Words:**

Norwegian Society, *A Doll’s House*, Male Domination, Gender Discrimination
pronouns are referred to as descriptive adjectives. These descriptive adjectives are the focus of this research. This research helps to explore gender discrimination in the play with the help of adjectives used for female characters. This is one of the studies that use a corpus approach to shed light on the frequency and implications of the descriptive adjectives used in Henrik Ibsen's play A Doll's House, in order to examine the representation of women.

**Objectives of the Study**

Following are the objectives of this research:

1. To explore the frequency of adjectives used for the description of Nora.
2. To examine the role of adjectives in the description of Nora.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the most used adjectives for Nora in the play, *A Doll's House*?
2. How does the use of adjective paint the predicaments of Norwegian women in general and Nora in particular?

**Delimitation**

Keeping in mind the time and space constraints, the work deals only with the portrayal of women in a single Norwegian play, A Doll's House. Also, it presents the case of one leading female character, Nora. Moreover, the study is focused on one lexical element, adjectives.

**Literature Review**

Language is a chief component of any debate, narrative, or discourse. The impact of what we say can be modified by how we say it. In other words, the appropriate use of words can generate a desired effect on the audience or the reader. The role of lexical items, especially nouns, pronouns, and adjectives, cannot be overemphasized in the portrayal of any character or situation in a literary piece of writing. Adjectives describe the essential properties of character or situation and therefore considered important in the depiction of characters, practices, and social norms. Digital humanities that combine the discipline of humanities with digital technologies have emerged as a very useful discipline that uses computer applications for the study of work of humanities such as literature, history, arts, etc. These days, Corpus tools are widely used in the analysis of different types of literature. A study on Bapsi Sidhwa (Mahmood, Mahmmod, & Nawaz, 2014) reported that Sidhwa often used adjectives in her plays. Similarly, in another corpus-based study, the frequent use of adjectives in Harry Potter and Deathly Hallows was investigated (Salim & Saad, 2016). The study was conducted to explore the frequency of frequently occurring adjectives for the description of three leading characters. Similarly, a study was carried out on the use of the evaluative adjective in academic texts (Kartal, 2017). The findings suggested that the use of evaluative adjectives can enhance the understanding of the students.

Likewise, Pierini (2009) investigated the usage of adjectives in a corpus of accommodation discourse in the Hotel and Tourism industry. The study reported that adjectives had been characterized by semantic and collocational restrictions. This study included three types of adjectives, the descriptive adjectives that described the details of the hotel, the experiential adjectives that expressed emotions and sensory perceptions, and the evaluative adjectives used to express overwhelmingly positive attitudes.

Fragaki (2009) conducted a corpus-based study of adjectives in the corpus of Greek texts. This study identified ten different forms of adjectives in the corpus that were descriptive, evaluative, classifying, deicing, specialized, color, verbal, relational, indefinite, and quantitative adjectives. Each category has been evaluated by frequency. Descriptive adjectives are used for the description of the properties of nouns and pronouns.
Adjectives like silly, stupid, spendthrift, and obstinate are descriptive adjectives. Descriptive adjectives cannot be measured and compared in empirical terms. On the other hand, evaluative adjectives describe the properties of a Noun and pronoun that can be measured and compared.

The purpose of this analysis is to critically examine the protagonist of the play in order to explore the portrayal of women in the play *A Doll’s House* by concentrating on the descriptive adjectives used for the female character, Nora. The character of Nora as a representative of Norwegian women holds central importance in literature. She is often believed to have very judiciously played the role of a typical Norwegian woman. Her role and situation in the play, by and large, present the situation of Norwegian women at the time this play was written. In the present work, we examined the role of adjectives in the description of the problem that Nora, as a woman, faces in her home and society.

**Research Methodology**

This research is mainly quantitative because corpus tools have been used to find the frequency of adjectives used for the representation of women in the play. This method is used to identify gender stereotypes and their thematic meanings by highlighting concordance lines and qualitatively analyzing the findings. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are, therefore used in this study. In this study, the researcher analyzed the adjectives used for the female character or protagonist of the play in order to depict the woman. A corpus of 23,444 was compiled using the online version of the play, *A Doll’s House* written by Henrik Ibsen. AntConc (Anthony, 2007) corpus analysis toolkit has been used to analyze the data. First of all, for this study, we converted the PDF format file into text form using AntFile Converter. Second, the text was tagged using TagAnt and then analyzed using AntConc software, which has five main options: Concordance, Clusters/N-grams, Collocates, Wordlist, and Keyword list. Only the Wordlist and the Concordance options were used for this study. The Wordlist was added to TagAnt, and the tagged adjectives were taken from KWIC (Keyword in context) for analysis. The concordance pattern for each adjective was explored, and a copy of the same in the form of a screenshot was used in the explanation below to discuss the context of each adjective.

**Theoretical Framework**

This research is based on Feminist Theory and Interactionist theory because Feminist theory and Interactionist theory of discrimination deal with gender-based inequality and discrimination. Since the primary aim of the study is the portrayal of women in Norwegian society, the feminist theory was used.

The feminist theory stresses the experiences of women and highlights that women in various societies are being subordinated and subjugated. In other words, the primary concern of the theory is gender discrimination faced by women. This theory emphasized gender inequality. This theory is augmentation the theory of Feminism. Discrimination, objectification, sexual harassment, patriarchy, oppression, and stereotyping are the themes explored by Feminism. It focuses on the social roles of men and women, their experience of work, and their interests. This theory sheds light on discrimination against women, how women are oppressed, subjugated, and abused by men.

Interactionist discrimination theory is a theoretical and social perspective that discusses the social issues facing society (Little, 2012). It is a study of how people’s interactions shape society. Language plays a very important role in defining social realities because social realities are made up of language. In language, the concept of sexism explores the traditional and social role of women discrimination and gender stereotypes and focuses on male dominance. In our local languages, we can observe that women are being undervalued by men and society. Therefore, the role of language in gender inequality cannot be undermined.

**Data Analysis**

The data selected for this study consists of the text of the play *A Doll’s House* by Henrik Ibsen in a text format that can be used conveniently for AntConc. The analysis of the adjectives and the interpretations are closely
interlinked therefore, the adjectives must be interpreted immediately. All adjectives used in the play are not feasible for this study because we wanted to explore the use of adjectives for the leading character of the play and therefore the top ten adjectives used have been selected for the analysis.

As we can see in the graph below that the most frequently used adjective for Nora is little with a frequency of 38. The second most commonly used adjective is dear with a frequency of 21, followed by sweet and poor with a frequency of 8. The other adjectives that we can see in the graph are spendthrift, thoughtless, silly, miserable, obstinate, and foolish. The explanation below on the adjective with their linguistic context shows how the adjectives used for women represent the overall situation of women of the Norwegian society.

**Figure 1:** Most Commonly Used Adjectives for NORA

**Little as an Adjective**

**Figure 2:** Adjective LITTLE with its linguistic context

**Figure 3:** Adjective LITTLE with its linguistic context
Some adjectives are often used in A Doll’s House to foreground the attributes of the leading female character. One of the most common adjectives in the play is “Little,” which Helmer used several times to refer to his wife, "Nora.” The above concordance lines exposed how the word “little” has been used in the play so many times. Helmer used some words like My little skylark, My little squirrel, My little spendthrift, My little
Nora, My little person, My little singing bird, etc. The words used by Helmer show that he treated Nora just as a toy, a child, or a pet because he used several animal names to refer to his wife "Nora". He just considered his wife a doll who is there to be admired and teased as often as he likes. Helmer appears to be a very selfish and self-centred person because he treated his wife in a very indifferent manner, not taking care of her emotional and personal needs. She was repeatedly treated as an inferior being and humiliated here often as he liked. The frequent use of the adjective little does have some symbolic importance. The word little refers to the littleness or smallness of the person for whom the word little is used. This means Nora is not an important character in the family as Helmer.

The adjective "little" that has been used so many times in the play means something small in quantity or size, small and tiny, delicate, submissive, and tender. In the play, the word "little" was used to sketch Nora's character, because she was so weak and fragile, dependent on her husband for everything. In other words, the word little belittles the role and importance of the main character, Nora, in her home and society.

**Dear as an Adjective**

![Figure 7: Adjective DEAR with its linguistic context](image7)

![Figure 8: Adjective DEAR with its linguistic context](image8)
Another adjective repeatedly used in the play is "Dear." This adjective is used so many times in the play that Nora used this word to address her father in order to show love and affection for her father. This word is mainly used for love and affection when one is loved and admired by another person. Helmer also used this word several times to refer to his wife Nora, e.g. my dear little Nora, my dear Nora, my dear little Skylark, etc.

At the surface level, it is used to express Helmer’s affection and love for his wife, Nora. But Helmer’s frequent use of this adjective in referring to his wife has different connotations. It seems at times that Helmer, Nora’s Husband, considers him a superior being, enjoying a much higher position in his home and society. It suggests that Helmer was at the top of the pedestal, enjoying a higher position. The recurrent use of the word "dear" by Helmer perpetuated the masculinity and sovereignty of man as superior in society and sometimes used a few words to show his preponderance and superiority over a woman.

**Sweet as an Adjective**

![Figure 9: Adjective SWEET with its linguistic context](image)

In this play, the adjective “sweet” has been used several times too. Helmer used this word in reference to his wife. Some examples are “sweet little baby doll”, “sweet little person”, “sweet Nora”, and “sweet little spendthrift”. The usual use of this particular adjective had the effect of creating a collective, constructed perspective for women in an exceedingly male-dominated society. In some patriarchal societies, women are culturally created as attractively beautiful and sweet to the eyes in their demeanor and behavior. As Nora used this word several times to expose her children to their attractiveness, Helmer also used the word “sweet” to refer to Nora to reveal that a woman must be sweet, so he instructed his wife not to eat macaroons, as they would spoil her teeth, and she might look ugly. The use of the adjective, “sweet” can possibly have two connotations in the play. First, Helmer perceives women as an object of attraction and beauty, and secondly, this adjective could also mean that women were like children and therefore instructed and warned as much as possible. This shows the dependence of Nora on her husband.

The use of the adjective “sweet” shows that Helmer considered Nora just an object of attraction and beauty, and he was just attracted to her sexually. This implies that for Helmer, Nora is just an object of beauty.

**Foolish as an Adjective**

![Figure 10: Adjective FOOLISH with its linguistic context](image)
Another adjective used for Nora in the play is “foolish”. This word was repeatedly used by Helmer to humiliate and degrade his wife, Nora. Foolish is a word that is used for stupidity and is used for the person who is less wise and has no sense. The frequent use of the word, foolish, must have tormented her psychologically, making her believe that she is an inferior being in society. This inferiority complex and a desire to get over that complex must have contributed to her decision of leaving the house. Helmer has always perceived his wife as a foolish and ignorant woman who is ill-mannered and does not know how to operate in society. He considered her to be a shallow-brained woman, but he liked her foolishness and incomprehension because he wanted her not to be independent. According to Helmer’s perception that a girl is sharp-witted and intellectual, then she is independent enough to make her own decisions and could fulfil all her desires on her own. Therefore, in order to maintain his dominance and supremacy, he wanted his wife to be foolish and helpless.

**Obstinate as an Adjective**

![Image of Adjective OBSTINATE with its linguistic context]

Obstinate is the word used in the play to refer to the leading female character of Nora. Helmer used this word to refer to his wife because he had been demeaning his wife throughout the story. He used that word for Nora because, according to Helmer, she was resistant to discipline and guidance. She was stubbornly tenacious and headstrong. Helmer always considered himself to be of the highest rank and always lowered the rank of his wife to make her a passive character. The use of the adjective, obstinate, suggests that Nora is not allowed by her husband to hold an independent opinion about anything. He, therefore, tortures her psychologically by using this adjective. This shows the controlling and disciplining nature of Helmer, Nora’s husband.

**Miserable as an Adjective**

![Image of Adjective MISERABLE with its linguistic context]

Miserable is used as an adjective for Nora by her husband, Helmer, to make her feel as if she is a crestfallen and low spirited woman. He always used to treat his wife with contempt by using several deposing words for her. This use of such words made her suffer from an inferiority complex and made her believe that she was an inferior woman deserving pity. This suggests that women in Norwegian society were not treated well. Moreover, they were considered inferior and miserable by the male members of society.
Silly as an Adjective

Figure 13: Adjective SILLY with its linguistic context

Silly is the word that is commonly used for a defenceless and trivial person. Helmer used to address his wife by saying that she was a silly girl because he saw her as a ridiculously frivolous and trivial woman who was thoughtless and helpless without her husband or father. This shows the patriarchal nature of Norwegian society, where men were thought to be wiser and smarter, and women were not.

Thoughtless as an Adjective

Figure 14: Adjective THOUGHTLESS with its linguistic context

Nora was considered a tactless and inconsiderate creature as well. His husband used this term because he saw Nora as the person who lacks concern and cares for others. Helmer considered her to be impudent and indiscreet, so he used “thoughtless” to humiliate his wife.

Poor as an Adjective

Figure 15: Adjective POOR with its linguistic context
Poor is the word that is used for Nora because she is in a lower and inferior position because she relied heavily on her husband. She was not an independent woman. She was weak and submissive; therefore, this word was used by Helmer to humiliate and abuse his wife. The adjective, poor, also suggests that Nora does not possess any property or money. She is, therefore, dependent on her husband for her financial needs.

**Spendthrift as an Adjective**

![Figure 16: Adjective SPENDTHRIFT with its linguistic context](image)

Helmer used this word for his wife because he always considered his wife to be a person who spends too much money, carelessly and irresponsibly. According to Helmer, Nora was a heedless person, and she spends her money extravagantly. So, he used the word “spendthrift” for her a few times in the play. The use of this adjective also suggests that women in Norwegian society were not responsible and therefore were not fit for saving money.

**Conclusion**

The present study explored the women representation in the play A Doll’s House by aiming at the frequently used adjectives that have been used in the play for the leading female character “Nora”. This study sought to find how women are depicted in the play to see whether the adjectives that are used for the female discriminate against the women or not. In order to achieve the specific objectives of this research on the representation of women in the play, we have collected all the adjectives from the play, in particular those that have been used for the female protagonist of the play. We used AntConc concordance software for getting the highly frequent adjectives and the contextual interpretations of those frequent adjectives used for a woman in the play. The findings of the study show that adjectives can have an important effect on the shaping of identity and personality of a person in a certain society.

In the play, a lot of insulting adjectives were uses which show her place in society. Nora is representative of Norwegian society which appeared to be more patriarchal when the play understudy was written. This implies that women in Norwegian society were considered inferior to men. The common attributes of Nora that have been presented with the help of the descriptive adjectives suggest that women in Norwegian society were considered to be weak, thoughtless, and unwise. The adjectives reflect the general attitude of society towards women because adjectives are a very important part of any language. It is through language human attitudes are expressed. These adjectives are the expression of social norms prevalent at the time when the play was written. In other words, the kind of adjectives, the writer has used for the description of Nora are the characteristics of women of that time. Women are submissive, fragile, dependent, careless, and stupid. The play presents a picture of a typical patriarchal society.

This study has very successfully highlighted the predicament of Norwegian women as depicted by Ibsen in his play, A Doll’s House. The present research will help future researchers interested in digital humanities. The discipline of digital humanities has emerged as a separate field that exploits the use of language software for the analysis of works of literature, history, and philosophy.
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