

“Hegemonic Masculinity as Backlash in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*  
And Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*”

الرجولة العنيفة كردة فعل في: بيت اللعبة لهنريك إبسين  
وسيارة شوارع اسمها رغبة لتينيسي ويليامز

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**Abstract**

The inherited norms of masculinity have always been a good issue to be discussed in countless numbers of literary works. The masculine traits, such as physical power, sexual drives, toughness and the ability to be a breadwinner, endow men with a privilege of being superior to women who are supposed to be completely subordinate, passive and unwilling to decide their own fate. Supporters of the male domination focused on the superiority of men and they neglected any role for women. However, some pro-women and pro-feminist writers, like Henrik Ibsen and Tennessee Williams tried to reveal their interests of women liberation, equality with men and independence in a different way. Both Ibsen and Williams exaggerated in some scenes of their plays the dominance of masculinity in order to grab the audiences’ attention to such classification of superior and inferior human beings. The aim of such writers is to urge women to speak up and move towards their liberation and independence. In Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and William’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it is clear that neither the hegemonic masculinity of the male protagonists, nor the passive submission of the female protagonists is appreciated. In both plays, there is a backlash against this dominant masculinity. The female protagonists try to start adverse reactions, but there is no happy ending in both plays because one ends up in an asylum and the other has no trace after she leaves her husband. This article discusses this backlash against masculinity in both plays and if it succeeds in freeing the women.

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## المُلخَص

تضخيم سيطرة الرجل في بعض المشاهد كي يشدوا اهتمام الجماهير نحو موضوع تصنيف مستويات البشر. وقد كان هدف هذين الكاتبين هو حث النساء على الكلام والتحرك للمطالبة بالحرية والاستقلالية. في مسرحيتي بيت اللعبة لهنريك إبسين وسيارة شوارع اسمها رغبة لتينييسي ويليامز، يبدو واضحاً قبح الرجولة القاسية وخنوع المرأة السليبي. وفي كلا المسرحيتين، نلاحظ رد فعل عنيفاً بمواجهة الرجولة المسيطرة. ولكن حالما تبدأ النساء هذه المواجهة، نرى أنه لا نهايات سعيدة، فإحداهن انتهى بها الأمر بمستشفى أمراض نفسية، وأخرى لم يُعرف مصيرها بعد تركها زوجها. يناقش هذا البحث ردة الفعل بمواجهة الرجولة في كلا المسرحيتين وما إذا نجحت أم لا.

لطالما كانت الأفكار الموروثة عن الرجولة موضع بحث لعدد لا متناهٍ من الأعمال الأدبية. وتعدُّ صفات الرجولة، مثل القوة الجسدية والرغبات الجنسية والقسوة، والقدرة على تأمين لقمة العيش من مقومات تفوق الرجال على النساء اللواتي ليس لديهنَّ القدرة أو الإمكانية على تقرير مصيرهنَّ. وقد ركّز الكُتّاب الداعمون لسيطرة الرجال على مقومات القوة لدى الرجال وتناسوا أيّ دور للمرأة. ومن ناحية أخرى، لجأ بعض الكُتّاب الداعمين للمرأة والنسوية أمثال هينريك إبسين وتينييسي وليامز إلى استعمال طريقة أخرى كي يُظهروا اهتماماتهم بتحرير المرأة ومساواتها بالرجل وجعلها غير تابعة لأحد. لقد حاول كلا الكاتبين

“Manliness consists not in bluff, bravado or loneliness. It consists in daring to do the right thing and facing consequences whether it is in matters social, political or other. It consists in deeds not words.”

*Mahatma Gandhi*

### I- Introduction

Men and women have always been classified in completely opposing categories. Ages ago, a common perception that a woman was born

from the man's rib was spread. This has made her since ever completely dependent on him; she has always been a follower, and he has been a leader. She is always in need of his presence. Whether this man is a father, a husband, a brother or son, a woman needs him. Men consider themselves superior since they are the breadwinners. Ibsen's Nora says that when she worked and earned money, she “felt as if [she] was a man” (I22.). Pleck writes that “the connection between

work and masculinity makes men accept unemployment as their personal failing as males, rather than analyze and change profit-based economy whose inevitable dislocations make them unemployed or unemployable” (qtd. in Murphy,2004 , p.65). This means that men get psychological payoffs from their jobs; they feel their manliness after they become economically productive. Manhood, or masculinity, has always been equated with dominance and power– over women, and over other men. “To speak of a patriarchal dividend is to raise exactly this question of interest. Men gain a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige and the right to command. They also gain a material dividend” (Connell,2005 , p.82). Men have always been privileged to dominate the elite jobs, the most prestigious ranks and live the high socio-economic standards.

Women have long understood this, and feminist women have spent the past three decades challenging both the public and the private expressions of men’s power and acknowledging their fear of men. Feminism as set of theories both explains women’s fear of men and empowers women to confront it both publicly and privately. Feminist women have theorized that masculinity is about the drive for domination, the

drive for power, for conquest. (qtd. in Murphy,2004 , p.193)

So, as women rebelled against the social hierarchy and male oppression and supremacy, they started calling for a role in the society; aside from being mothers and housewives, they wanted to participate in all the fields which were considered a male privilege; women wanted to write, to elect, to work in politics, to work outside the house, and be breadwinners like men. They wanted to be independent; thus, they called for equality in a society which is run by masculine laws with no emotions. However, “challenging and changing women’s roles and rights have not gone unchecked. The successes of feminism have led to intense antifeminist efforts, also called the backlash against feminism. A backlash against feminism has surfaced in response to each wave of activism for women. Antifeminism opposes changes in women’s roles, status, rights, or opportunities” (Wood, 2009 p. 89). Antifeminists believed that “feminism has destroyed families, twisted women, and caused grief to men. And some men feel threatened by women’s progress toward equal status” (Wood,2009 , p.115). They felt that they were losing their privileges which had been inherited for ages on behalf of “inferior” creatures. Hence, it is a matter of cultural misconceptions.

Men will not agree to face women as rivals in all fields after they had been subordinates. The main question that a researcher might ask is about the reason that makes men feel that they are superior to women. Connell (2005) relates this belief to physical power. He writes,

[True] masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies— to be inherent in a male body. Either the body drives and directs action (e.g. men are naturally more aggressive than women; rape results from uncontrollable lust or an innate urge to violence), or the body sets limits to action (e.g. men naturally do not take care of infants)" (p.45).

It is a matter of bodily differences supported by a cultural dynamic, and from this point, the concept of 'hegemony' derives. Additionally, Connell (2005) defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women... the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity are always the most powerful people" (p.77). Similarly, Pilcher & Imelda (2004) define masculinity as

The set of social practices and cultural representations associated with being a man, and 'hegemonic masculinity' is at the top of the gender hierarchy; [it] is the culturally dominant ideal of masculinity centered around authority, physical toughness and strength, heterosexuality and paid work. This is an ideal of masculinity that few actual men live up to, but from which most gain advantage (pp. 8283-).

Thus, males are not born with masculinity in their genetic make-up, but society and culture endow them with such behavior and power politics. Joseph Pleck argues that "men want to have power over women because of deep lying psychological needs in male personality." He continues that "men oppress women as adults because they experienced women as oppressing them as children" (qtd. in Murphy, 2004, p.58). Therefore, true masculinity occurs when a man shows his power and domination over women and other men.

The appearance of the concepts of 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'backlash' in literary works has passed in ebbs and flows. When there are feminist voices calling for women rights, new literary works of men writers come into light: either to back up the feminist voices or as a backlash asking for preserving men's privileges.

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* tackle such topic of hegemonic masculinity. In *A Doll's House* (1960), Torvald treats Nora as a doll, a stereotypical female as a man likes it, but when she deduces that he is exploiting her femininity, she decides to rebel; consequently, he practices his hegemonic masculinity upon her. Similarly, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stella is completely dependent on her husband, Stanley; she needs him to support her financially; Stanley rapes her sister Blanche, the disreputable woman, yet he is still a leader in the house. Therefore, both Torvald and Stanley practice their hegemonic masculinity, as a sign of backlash for women emancipation.

## II- *A Doll's House*

Henrik Ibsen is mostly known for his feminist views and characters. His women characters always challenge the stereotypical women who are blindly driven by men. However, Ibsen never admitted being a feminist as proved by his speech held at the festival of the Norwegian Women's Right League in Christiania, May 26 1898.:

I am not a member of the Women's Right League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda. I have been

more poet and less social philosopher than people generally seem to believe. I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me, it has seemed a problem of humanity in general. And if you read my books carefully, you will understand this. True enough, it is desirable to solve the problem of women's rights, along with the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity. (p. 65)

This is an assurance that Ibsen's purpose is to raise a humanitarian issue; he considers that it is not important to be a feminist in order to defend women's rights, one can only be a human being. His play is not only a critique of the stereotypical gender roles, but it also triggers the ethical issue of a master-slave (man-woman) relation. As mentioned before, women were always considered as subordinates. As Ibsen's play opens, we find Nora, who is wearing the masquerade costume that metaphorically reveals her as a doll, and we directly feel that she resembles the complete subordination. Torvald, her husband, often controls her actions and uses pet names and ridiculous flattery to grab her heart.

She is nothing but a silly “featherhead”, a “squirrel”, a “little skylark”, a “song bird” or a cute “scatterbrain” whose thoughts are childish, foolish and typical to any other woman’s. After her husband’s financial status had improved, she became more concerned about shopping and visiting neighbors. Torvald asks Nora to save money, and he forbids her from eating sweets. Since her childhood, Nora’s father considered her as the “other”. He dominated her life and decisions, and he treated her like an immature child, but played with her as she played with her dolls. After that, her father delivered her to Torvald, who treated her like a valued possession. She only moved from a patriarch to another. She is an object, not a human being. This is shown by Nora’s self-realization and awakening at the end of the play:

When I lived at home with Daddy, he fed me all his opinions, until they became my opinions. Or if they didn’t, I kept quiet about it because I knew he wouldn’t have liked it. He used to call me his doll-child, and he played with me the way I used to play with my dolls. And when... Daddy handed me over to you. You arranged everything according to your taste, and I adapted my taste to yours... Now, looking back, I feel as if I’ve lived a beggar’s life—from hand to mouth. (III114.)

Thus, Nora is shown as a typical female, who is weak and docile. Women, at that time, were taught since their infancy to have the “softness of temper, outward obedience, scrupulous attention” (Wollstonecraft, 1996, p. 22). It was a replicated image in most societies. A man who is a stereotype for a master and a breadwinner only needs to possess a beautiful woman who fulfills his sexual desire, probably enjoying a slightly better position than a prostitute; the latter seeks money for doing a job, while the first trades her youth and beauty with fulfilling her husband’s desires. This clearly appears in Torvald’s words,

Poor little frightened songbird... Rest assured; my wings are broad enough to shelter you. How lovely and secure our home, Nora. A sanctuary for you. I’ll keep you here like a hunted dove I’ve rescued unhurt from the hawk’s talons. ...For a man there’s something intensely reassuring and pleasurable about knowing that he’s forgiven his wife—and that he’s forgiven her sincerely, with all his heart. It’s as if she becomes somehow doubly his possession, as if he’s allowed her to be reborn, so that in some way she becomes both his wife and his child. (III111.)

The love which Torvald expresses to his wife is not that kind of supreme

emotion which bonds a couple who – in the modern sense – share decisions, responsibilities and affection; on the contrary, Torvald shows his superiority in front of Nora; as they are discussing loans, he tells her that he does not like lending or borrowing money, and he asks her about what she will do if he dies after he had already borrowed some money from people. She simply answers that she does not care because she does not know those people. Torvald replies, “That is like a woman!” (I2.); a clear evidence of underestimating her intelligence, and ability to think or act properly. He also does not allow Nora to eat macaroons, so that she does not spoil her teeth; he usually raises his threatening finger in her face, and says, “Hasn’t the little sweet-tooth been breaking the rules today? Nora answers, “I shouldn’t think of doing what you disapprove of” (I. 8). Helmer usually answers, “My little bird must never do that again” (I44.). Torvald always blames Nora for the things she buys; when she asks him to see the things she had bought, he “goes up to her and takes her playfully by the ear... ‘Bought,’ did you say? Has my little spendthrift been making the money fly again?” (I3.). His hegemony, which has already existed in him, starts to become more apparent especially when he knows that Nora has done a

“masculine” thing of borrowing some money for his sake, “Why, a wife can’t borrow without her husband’s consent” (I10.). Women back then were not allowed to take any loans without the permission of their fathers or husbands – the patriarch responsible for their fate.

Torvald seems to rarely spend time with his wife and children. He spends most of his time in his demesne, and when he is at home, he spends a lot of time in his study. When Nora asks him to come and see the things she had bought, his reply was “Don’t disturb me” (I2.); a patronizing warning which exaggerates a reaction in order to show his supremacy.

However, the first serious conversation between Nora and Torvald is after eight years of marriage, and it happens that it is at the end of Act III. She talks to her husband, “We have never sat down in earnest together to try and get at the bottom of anything” (III66.). So, she wakes up after this long time of false attitude toward marriage, and realizes that she has been a doll in a playroom, or metaphorically speaking, a woman in a cage. Leaving the keys, taking off her wedding ring and slamming the door in the last scene shows that she has become more aware of being abused, and she has decided to restart her life somewhere else. Torvald’s hegemony is so apparent



when he does not listen to Nora; on the contrary, he does the opposite. When she asks him not to dismiss Krogstad because of a simple reason, he stops the discussion, “Never mind, you call my motives petty; then I must be petty too. Petty! Very well. Now we’ll put an end to this once for all” (II60.). He calls Ellen and asks her to deliver Krogstad’s dismissal letter. Another example is when Nora wants to stay for a longer time at the party, Helmer drags her “almost by force into the hall” (III94.). Helmer always uses his bodily strength and his taken-for-granted superiority in order to tame Nora.

Helmer seems to be a fond lover. He talks to Nora about his feelings, “Do you know, Nora, I often wish some danger might threaten you, that I might risk body and soul, and everything, everything, for your dear sake” (III, 105). However, despite of his extreme love, Torvald does not favor to show his sentiments in front of people, or they will think that he is weak. “If it were now reported that the new manager [Torvald] let himself be turned round his wife’s little finger... I am to make myself the laughing-stock of everyone” (II60.). His hegemony becomes really apparent when he reads Krogstad’s letter; Torvald’s mood changes because he is afraid that his reputation will be affected. He screams at his wife, “Oh,

what an awful awakening! During all these eight years— she who was my pride and my joy— a hypocrite, a liar—worse— a criminal. Oh! The hideous of it!” (III107.). At that point, Torvald starts reminding Nora of her father’s “dishonesty, no religion, no morality, no sense of duty” (III107.). All what Torvald cares about is that “this disaster is brought upon [him] by an unprincipled woman” (III107.).

Torvald’s extreme anger is cooled down when he receives Krogstad’s IOU letter, which is supposed to be for Nora. Helmer is relieved when he knows that his reputation is not threatened anymore, he ‘forgives’ Nora and tells her that playtime is over, and “now comes the time for education”. Nora asks, “Whose education? Mine, or the children’s? Helmer: Both, my dear Nora” (III115.). He still thinks that he is superior to her, and he is the one to forgive not her. He tells her that “No man sacrifices his honour, even for one he loves.” Nora simply answers that “Millions of women have done so” (III120.). The last thing we hear is the slamming of the door, and Nora is gone. Her fate is not known afterwards.

Backlash is also evident in *A Doll’s House* especially with Krogstad and Dr. Rank. When Nora names her friend Christine to work at Torvald’s office, he hires her immediately. However, “It’s



[Krogstad's] place [Torvald] intend[s] for Mrs. Linden" (II58 ). At that moment, Krogstad blackmails Nora in order to retain his former position from Christine. As for Dr. Rank, who visits the Helmer's house daily, he feels that he had been substituted by Christine. He does not like it at all, and this can also be a symbol of backlash.

NORA: Oh! You're surely not jealous of Christina?

RANK: Yes, I am. She will be my successor in this house. When I'm gone, this woman will perhaps –". (II, 80)

Therefore, in *A Doll's House*, men feel that they are substituted by women. These women rebel against the cultural norms; they do not want to be men's dolls or prostitutes, or just acting their traditional role of being mothers or housewives. Women want to be free from men's obsession of showing their masculinity. The backlash in this play refers to the criticism that arose from defying the inherited, traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Nora leaves her husband, her doll's house and her children to start a new and independent life by her own.

### III- *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Although William's play presents gender differences very clearly like *A Doll's House* does, *A Streetcar Named*

*Desire* surpasses Ibsen's play as it presents the ugly face of masculinity: it is aggressive, erotic, dominant, violent, and lacks refinement, manners and sensitivity. *A Streetcar* also presents another type of female; the Southern belle, or that woman who is considered a beautiful, sex object. Additionally, there is that submissive woman who is completely dependent on her husband, and loves him despite his bad manners. With these two types of women, Williams tends to show that masculinity dominates, and women, whatever they are, are subordinate to men. *A Streetcar Named Desire* shows that females suffer from patriarchal oppression in a society where rules are launched by males.

Stanely Kowalski, is a "richly feathered male bird among hens". He has obvious, violent and aggressive traits. He represents the ultra-masculine as he loves all that is male-identified: good steak, bowling, poker, whiskey and Jax beer, crude jokes, and above all his "baby doll", Stella. Stella, in turn, proves to be the inferior and passive woman, who does not object to Stan's violence. She loves him and completely depends on him in all the details of her life; her main excuse is that "there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark – that sort of make everything else

seem – unimportant” (iv162.). Blanche tells her that this is only “brutal desire”, but Stella, the typical, submissive wife does not agree on this.

Gender inequality is also very obvious throughout *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Stanely is in charge of the household and all the visitors who come to play or stay. In fact, Stanely is the symbol of hegemonic masculinity which catches both women and men in the play. This masculinity reaches its maximum limits when he rapes Blanche in the end. Stanley talks to Stella and Blanche rudely all the time, “You hens cut out that conversation in there!” (iii147.). When he is angry, he always tosses things found in front of him out of the window or into the floor, or simply in his wife’s face. Stella talks about him to her sister, and defends his nature, for “people have got to tolerate each other’s habits” (158); “Stanley’s always smashed things. Why, on our wedding night– soon as we came here– he snatched off one of my slippers and rushed about the place smashing the light-bulbs with it... he smashed all the light-bulbs with the heel of my slipper [she laughs]” (iv157.). In Scene three, when Stanley is playing poker with his friends, Stella, the pregnant wife, suggests that it is time for them to stop playing cards. Stanley refuses to acknowledge her request and then

slaps her on her buttock. This is a symbol of sexual harassment. Blanche tells Stella that the latter is “married to a madman!” (158).

The “powerful” Stanely also strikes Stella again in scene eight; he throws his dinner against the wall in a fit of rage.

STELLA. Mr. Kowalski is too busy making a pig of himself to think of anything else!

STANLEY. That’s right, baby.

STELLA. Your face and your fingers are disgustingly greasy. Go and wash up and then help me clear the table. (*He hurls a plate to the floor.*)

STANLEY. That’s how I’ll clear the table! (*He seizes her arm.*) Don’t ever talk that

way to me! “Pig — Polack — disgusting — vulgar — greasy!” them kind of words

have been on your tongue and your sister’s too much around here! (194-195)

Blanche summarizes Stan’s masculinity, which is not gentlemanly at all. She warns Stella about his ‘bestial’ nature as

he acts like an animal, has an animal’s habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There’s even something – sub-human– something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something – ape-like about him...

Stanely Kowalski– survivor of the Stone Age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle!” (iv163 .)

Even when Blanche talks to Stan about his qualities, she tries to be vague when she mentions his bestial nature. She says,

I bet you were born under Aries. Aries people are forceful and dynamic. They dote on noise! They love to ban things around! You must have had lots of banging around in the army, and now that you’re out, you make up for it by treating inanimate objects with such a fury! (v167 .)

Stan does not seem to care about these details. He had already informed both Stella and Blanche that he is “the king around here, so don’t forget it! [He hurls a cup and saucer to the floor]” (195). The ironic fact is that both women are quiet, and never argue after such violent reactions take place. Men also have their share from Stan’s hegemony. When Steve and Mitch were trying to calm him down in order not to hurt his wife, he “nearly throws them off” (152), and he calls them bad names, “Let go of me, you sons of bitches!” (153). Actually, he always yells at them when they speak something against his will.

Another example of hegemonic masculinity lies with Steve who hits Eunice. She shrieks, “You hit me!

I’m gonna call the police! [A clatter of aluminium striking a wall is heard, followed by a man’s angry roar, shouts, and overturned furniture. There is a crash; then a relative rush]” (v166 .). However, as Stella submits to her husband’s brutality, Eunice also does not call the police, but instead, she gets a drink. Stanley’s hegemonic masculinity is also reflected as a backlash which appears clearly when Stanely shows his envy from Blanche’s presence. He tells Stella that they were fine, as a husband and ‘baby doll’-wife, until his sister-in-law shows up and conquers a part of Stella’s heart. It is to the extent that Stanely digs in Blanche’s past and tries to find the facts that make Stella hate her sister in order to dismiss her out.

STANLEY: When we first met, me and you, you thought I was common. How right

you was, baby. I was common as dirt. You showed me the snapshot of the place with

the columns. I pulled you down off them columns and how you loved it, having them

coloured lights going! And wasn’t we happy together, wasn’t it all okay till she

[Blanche] showed here? (*Stella makes a slight movement. Her look goes suddenly*

*inward as if some interior voice had called her name. She begins a slow, shuffling*

*progress from the bedroom to the kitchen, leaning and resting on the back of the*

*chair and then on the edge of a table with a blind look and listening expression.*

*Stanley, finishing with his shirt, is unaware of her reaction.) And wasn't we happy*

*together? Wasn't it all ok? Till she showed here. Hoity-toity, describing me as an ape (p.187).*

#### IV- Conclusion

Whether they are considered feminists or not, both Ibsen and Williams try to shed the light on a serious, eternal, universal problem; that is the dominance of men and the subordination of women. Women who try to rebel end up in an asylum, like Blanche De Bois or with an unknown fate like Nora. Both writers also bring to our attention the idea that most men treat women as 'dolls' rather than respectful wives who have a share in the household.

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