

Tanika Gupta's *A Doll's House*: Different Symptoms of the Same Experience

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Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is a significant example of a theatrical production that challenges conventional perceptions of gender roles, specifically within the domestic sphere. Nora and Torvald are representative of common household stereotypes: the submissive "spendthrift" wife who needs to be taught, guided, and controlled by the authoritative and patriarchal husband. Although their relationship appears to be characterized by mutual trust and respect, Nora's apprehension towards Torvald learning about her borrowing money for a trip to Italy suggests otherwise. Her attempts to conceal the truth from Torvald eventually fail, prompting him to reprimand Nora on the grounds of disobedience, incompetence, and even a lack of morals. Ultimately, Nora leaves Torvald and their children in order to understand her identity and position in society. Nora's decision has been pivotal in shaping perceptions of gender roles in society, prompting various adaptations of Ibsen's work aimed at translating the Norwegian experience from 1879 to a larger audience, across generations and cultures. One particularly compelling adaptation is Tanika Gupta's version of *A Doll's House*, which introduces the character of Niru as a counterpart to Nora. This version, also set in 1879, transports the setting from Norway to British colonized India. While the core story remains the same, there are various changes made to the social, cultural, and religious contexts. These changes enable Gupta's adaptation to contribute to Ibsen's exploration of gender roles. In particular, Gupta's version navigates the complexities of gender roles in an era of colonization, wherein different cultures and religions intermingle, resulting in societal models distinct from the European and Christian framework of Norwegian society. In this paper, I explore Tanika Gupta's *A Doll's House* in order to understand how the adaptation successfully advances the ongoing conversation about gender roles in the household.

Gupta's adaptation reimagines Ibsen's story with notable changes made to characters and setting. Niru is a young Bengali woman who is married to Tom Helmer, a British lawyer. The play also features a range of other characters, including Dr. Rank, Krishna Lahiri/Mrs. Lahiri (Mrs. Linde), Kaushik Das (Krogstad), and Uma (the maid). The events are set in Calcutta, in 1879, a time when the city served as the administrative capital of the expanding British Raj, a colonial empire with global reach. This setting highlights the intricate interplay between Indian and British cultures, as represented within the Helmer household. Niru and Tom's relationship can be interpreted as a representation of colonized India, where the British figure has authority over an Indian, and this dynamic mirrors the conventional hierarchy of the authoritative husband and subdued wife.

In the context of the colonial era, there are multiple historical events which need to be taken into account when analyzing the play. In 1879, Queen Victoria was crowned the Empress of India, a monumental decision that influenced perceptions of women's roles in society (BBC Radio 4x). With a woman inhabiting a position of administrative power, the subdued role of women in marriage, as well as society at large, was increasingly scrutinized. At the time, mixed race marriages were also commonplace, highlighting how two very different upbringings interact within a marriage. In the case of Niru and Tom, the inequalities within their marriage are not only based on gender roles, but also on perceptions of individual cultures and religions. For example, despite growing resistance to conventional gender roles, Mrs. Lahiri remarks that certain conventions still remain, notably in how it is still very difficult for women to work in India (19:54-19:58). Amidst the historical forces shaping India, Niru is situated at the center of the conflict between patriarchal norms and the growing resistance towards them. Gupta's work does not undermine Nora's story; rather, it places itself alongside Ibsen's text to present women's struggle with gender roles as a universal theme spanning across different continents.

Cultural attitudes are very prominently featured in Gupta's work. For example, while Ibsen's Helmer addresses Nora as "skylark," Gupta's Helmer specifically addresses Niru as his "little Indian skylark" and "exotic palm squirrel" (05:42-05:52). These terms reveal a perception of Indian culture as inferior and the derogatory label of "exotic" situates Tom in a position of cultural superiority over Niru. Tom's sense of superiority is seen in many more instances: for example, Tom mentions that financial greed is "hereditary" among Indians (08:10), and when confronted with the possibility of having his reputation destroyed, he laments his predicament as being at the mercy of a "monstrous, unscrupulous, ill-bred Indian man" (1:36:06-1:36:11). Kaushik also uses Tom as an example to highlight a general British attitude towards Indians, mentioning that Tom would do anything to sit on his "high horse and look down on dirty Indians" (1:08:34-1:08:40). Tom perceives Indian culture as a product, or even a service, that needs to be consumed, controlled, and most importantly, owned. Along with associating Niru with skylarks and other creatures of prey, Tom makes it a point to remark that she is a "plaything" and "an expensive pet" (07:40-07:47). In Ibsen's work, the association merely highlights a patriarchal control over a woman, but in Gupta's work, situated in the context of colonization, it also encapsulates a British desire to control Indian culture. The play features numerous examples of Indian culture. In addition to English, Hindi and Konkani (native to Calcutta) are briefly used across Gupta's adaptation. The tarantella is replaced by a classical Indian dance, accompanied by a percussionist instead of a pianist (1:14:09-1:15:55). The vastly diverse representation of Indian culture is juxtaposed with overbearing British attitudes and their quest for control in order to highlight the cultural interplay that also plays a part in Niru's decision to leave, an aspect that Ibsen's version does not focus on.

Along with cultural attitudes, religion is much more prevalent in Gupta's adaptation. While Ibsen's Helmer makes a general remark about how morals and religion go hand in hand, Gupta expands on the idea of religious differences in the mixed marriage between Niru and Tom. Tom associates morality with Christianity, citing how, in order to be married to him, Niru had to convert from Hinduism to Christianity. It is interesting to note that while Nora had to change at the end of the play in order to discover her identity, Niru had already undergone a significant change before her ultimate decision to leave Tom and their children behind. During the confrontation preceding her decision to leave, Tom dramatically asserts that despite her conversion, Niru will always remain a "heathen" who had wronged him—hinting that in his eyes this core aspect of her identity is immutable (1:35:51-1:35:58). The simplistic notion that Christianity is a moral and peaceful religion is immediately undermined by Tom's premature outburst,

which enables Niru to rethink religious belief as a whole. Ibsen does not elaborate on religious morals and Nora only mentions religious morals in passing. However, in a colonized Indian society, where Hinduism and Christianity are in close contact with each other, the question of religious morals is a lot more complicated for Niru, especially given that she has practiced the two religions. After having been a doll-child for her father and a doll-wife for Tom, she grapples with the challenge of understanding religious morals in a colonized society. In Niru's justification for why she has to leave Tom, the influence of religious morals practiced in society holds significantly more weight than in Nora's case.

Although Gupta's version has been staged in various theatres, I specifically chose to focus on a radio broadcast of the play—a BBC Radio 4x broadcast, directed by Nadia Molinari—in order to highlight how the message is still delivered, even in the absence of visual elements. With a radio broadcast, the lack of visuals is compensated for by an enriched sound design. Tabla maestro Shahbaz Hussain plays a very prominent role in this production by lending a culturally accurate sound. Apart from being featured in Niru's performance, the tabla is also used as a transition to highlight Niru having taken off her “fancy dress,” thus stepping into a new sense of self (1:40:30-1:41:15). The tabla is performed in a specific manner, paying attention to a rhythmic crescendo that highlights a slow transformation of Niru from being submissive and subdued to gaining authority over herself. Additionally, there are ambient sounds across the play, ranging from the crackling of fire that accentuates the conversation between Niru and Mrs. Lahiri, to the sound of crickets chirping at night when Niru and Tom have their final conversation. Along with a judicious use of instruments, sound is also pertinent to gaining access to the characters. Niru, Kaushik, Uma, and Mrs. Lahiri speak English with very particular intonations and tonalities, separating them from the more “refined” English spoken by Tom and Dr. Rank. By enhancing sound design, Molinari makes Gupta's text more accessible without the need to visually stage it. Along with sound design, theatre is almost always associated with visuals, in terms of wardrobe, makeup, set design, and lighting. While these aspects are important in theatrical productions, Molinari's attention to detail in the absence of visuals highlights how the message is the most fundamental aspect of theatre. Emotions are not compromised in the absence of visual cues such as facial expressions, and the atmosphere and setting are not inaccessible in the absence of a stage. By enhancing sound design, Molinari manages to imagine Gupta's text as a theatrical production lacking visuals that can still be placed in conversation with Ibsen's text.

In conclusion, I have explored various aspects of Molinari's direction of Gupta's text, and how the adaptation advances the conversation initiated by Ibsen. In Gupta's text, the perception of gender roles in a household is complicated in a colonized society. However, this complexity in Niru's pursuit of empowerment does not imply that Nora's struggles can easily be dismissed. Both characters represent a strong response to the status quo, dealing with various circumstances and overcoming a host of obstacles in order to be recognized as individuals who are not predisposed to be controlled by male authority figures. In fact, the conversation is more fruitful when Gupta's Niru and Ibsen's Nora are juxtaposed. This also highlights the importance of considering an adaptation as a work in its own right. Indeed, the act of adapting works translates the message to a wider audience. Even though Niru and Nora face different societal conventions in 1879, ultimately they are both women responding strongly to patriarchal control. Gupta not only successfully translates Ibsen's work to a colonial context, but also manages to highlight the universality of women's struggle.

Works Cited

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