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From silenced portrait to liberated self: A feminist-existentialist reading of female agency in “My Last Duchess” and *A Doll’s House*

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative feminist-existentialist reading of female agency in Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” and Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, through the theoretical frameworks of Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of woman as the “Other” and Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith). The study examines how both the Duchess and Nora Helmer are subjected to patriarchal power structures that deny them autonomy, identity, and freedom. Drawing on de Beauvoir, the analysis explores how these women are positioned as subordinate “Others,” defined entirely in relation to male authority and denied full subjecthood. Sartre’s existentialist lens reveals how both characters inhabit roles constructed by social expectations: the Duchess remains entrapped in a static, aestheticized identity curated by her husband, while Nora initially performs the role of the obedient wife, suppressing her authentic self in the process. The paper reveals a spectrum of female resistance within these texts. While the Duchess remains silenced, both literally and symbolically, within the male gaze, Nora undergoes a profound existential transformation. Her final decision to abandon her domestic role and pursue self-realization signifies a rupture from *mauvaise foi* and the pursuit of authentic existence. In this context, the paper identifies Nora as a literary alter ego of the Duchess: a counterpoint whose rebellion and self-liberation illuminate what the Duchess was denied. This juxtaposition not only deepens the understanding of gendered oppression and existential denial but also offers a continuum of female subjectivity from passive objectification to radical self-assertion. Ultimately, the study underscores how these canonical works continue to speak powerfully to contemporary debates on gender, autonomy, and the existential pursuit of freedom.

Keywords: Feminist existentialism, female agency, patriarchy, simone de beauvoir, jean-paul sartre

1. Introduction

The relationship between gender, identity, and power has long been central to literary discourse, particularly in the context of patriarchal societies where female agency is systematically constrained. In the literary canon of the nineteenth century, representations of women often reveal the ways in which social structures shaped, limited, or entirely silenced female subjectivity. As Gilbert and Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the Victorian woman was typically “confined and controlled in literature just as she was in society” (Gilbert and Gubar 13). This observation is especially relevant to Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” (1842) and Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879) two works that, despite differences in genre, form, and context, converge in their depiction of women struggling under the weight of male authority and cultural expectation.

Browning’s dramatic monologue and Ibsen’s realist play present contrasting yet interrelated portrayals of female existence within patriarchal frameworks. The Duchess, rendered voiceless and objectified through her husband’s narrative, embodies the silenced and aestheticized woman whose subjectivity is obliterated. Nora Helmer, conversely, evolves from a performance of domestic obedience to a moment of radical self-assertion, ultimately rejecting her assigned role in pursuit of autonomy. This study situates these two characters on a continuum of female agency, using the dual theoretical frameworks of Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of woman as the “Other” and Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith), to interrogate how patriarchal structures not only constrain women externally but also shape their internal consciousness and potential for resistance.

The significance of this comparative inquiry lies in its ability to trace the development of female agency across literary modes and moments.

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While both characters exist within deeply gendered cultures, their outcomes diverge in instructive ways: one is permanently silenced, the other discovers her voice. As Susan Bordo explains, cultural texts do not merely reflect gender norms but participate in their construction and contestation, often offering insight into “the insidious ways that power reproduces itself culturally” (Bordo 167). Studying these texts together through a feminist-existentialist lens allows for a more nuanced understanding of the psychological, social, and ontological mechanisms that inhibit or enable female autonomy.

Critical scholarship on Browning’s “*My Last Duchess*” has often emphasized the Duke’s control over both the narrative and the Duchess’s image. Herbert Sussman interprets the Duke’s monologue as “an aesthetic and authoritarian performance of masculinity” in which the woman becomes a mere object of display (Sussman 118). Catherine Golden places the Duchess within the Victorian “cult of domesticity,” suggesting that her “failure to embody silence and passivity is ultimately what condemns her” (Golden 35). Joseph Dupras adds that the poem enacts “a kind of aesthetic violence,” wherein the Duke’s control over the Duchess’s image reflects broader cultural anxieties about women’s visibility and independence (Dupras 211). These readings consistently portray the Duchess as a figure denied voice, agency, and subjecthood.

Feminist critics have also explored how the Duchess is rendered as the “Other” within a male-centric symbolic order. De Beauvoir’s formulation that “woman is the Other” (de Beauvoir 26) provides a philosophical framework for understanding the Duchess’s position not as an individual, but as an extension or possession of the Duke. Scholars such as Margaret Reynolds have employed de Beauvoir’s lens to argue that the Duchess’s identity “is consumed by the gaze that objectifies her,” reinforcing her status as a cultural artifact rather than a living subject (Reynolds 58). Despite these insightful engagements, few critics have examined the existential implications of the Duchess’s silence specifically her entrapment in a socially imposed identity that negates the freedom to act or define herself, a core concern in Sartrean existentialism.

On the other hand, Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* has long served as a landmark text in feminist literary criticism. Nora’s transformation from a compliant wife to a self-aware individual has been widely interpreted as a symbolic break from nineteenth-century domestic ideology. Joan Templeton argues that Nora’s decision to leave is not simply a rejection of patriarchal marriage but an assertion of “moral and philosophical autonomy” (Templeton 33). Toril Moi, in her seminal study *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, asserts that Nora’s exit is a paradigmatic act of existential authenticity: “She chooses to become a self an individual capable of making free choices” (Moi 259). This reading connects Nora’s journey to Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of *mauvaise foi*, in which individuals surrender their freedom by inhabiting roles defined by others. For much of the play, Nora lives in bad faith, performing the part of the ideal wife. Only at the climax does she reject this performance, embracing instead the uncertain but authentic path of freedom.

Recent scholars have expanded on this existential reading. Amal Amireh frames Nora’s act as “a political and philosophical rupture that challenges not only domestic norms but also Enlightenment ideals of fixed identity”

(Amireh 318). Shannon Cron explores how Nora’s rebellion destabilizes the moral logic of bourgeois society, arguing that her awakening “calls into question the essentialist narratives of femininity and motherhood” (Cron 82). These analyses highlight the philosophical weight of Nora’s decision and its enduring relevance to feminist thought. However, this critical attention has not extended into comparative dialogues with other literary figures who lack such awakening particularly figures like Browning’s Duchess, whose story ends not in rebellion but in silence.

The theoretical contributions of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre provide a compelling framework for this comparison. De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* argues that woman has been consistently denied subjectivity and defined in relation to man, noting that “she is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her” (de Beauvoir 26). Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, describes *mauvaise foi* as the self-deception that arises when one adopts a fixed identity in order to escape the burden of freedom (Sartre 70). Together, these concepts illuminate how gendered oppression operates both externally through social structures and internally through psychological conformity. As Kelly Oliver notes, feminist existentialism reveals “how women’s subjection is not only enforced by external power but also internalized through identification with socially imposed roles” (Oliver 44). This theoretical fusion allows for a richer analysis of both the Duchess’s fatal compliance and Nora’s liberating defiance.

Despite the availability of rich feminist and existentialist readings of each text, the two works are rarely brought into sustained comparative dialogue. While scholars such as Toril Moi and Joan Templeton have thoroughly explored *A Doll’s House*, and others like Golden and Dupras have examined “*My Last Duchess*”, few have examined how these texts jointly illuminate a spectrum of female experience under patriarchy from passive objectification to radical self-assertion. More importantly, the existential dimension of the Duchess’s silencing remains underexplored. Unlike Nora, who breaks free from bad faith, the Duchess’s entrapment in aesthetic identity is portrayed as complete her subjectivity consumed by the gaze of her husband. This paper argues that such juxtaposition reveals a critical continuum of female subjectivity: one that begins in silence and ends in speech, from being seen to seeing oneself.

This study, therefore, addresses a critical gap in literary scholarship. It offers a comparative feminist-existentialist reading of “*My Last Duchess*” and *A Doll’s House*, using the frameworks of de Beauvoir and Sartre to interrogate how patriarchal power both suppresses and conditions female identity. The Duchess and Nora are not merely literary figures but philosophical subjects whose lives reflect the ontological tensions between being-for-others and being-for-itself. By placing them in dialogue, this research aims to deepen our understanding of how literature articulates the limits and possibilities of female agency and why, in some cases, women break free while in others, they are eternally framed.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a dual theoretical lens combining feminist theory and existentialist philosophy to examine how patriarchal structures shape and suppress female identity and agency in Robert Browning’s *My Last Duchess* and Henrik

Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Specifically, it engages with Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "Other" and Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith) to interrogate the ways in which women are constructed, constrained, and at times resist being confined within male-dominated systems of meaning.

2.1 Feminist Perspective: Simone de Beauvoir's Concept of the "Other"

Simone de Beauvoir's foundational feminist work, *The Second Sex* (1949), introduces the concept of woman as the "Other," a position imposed upon women by a male-dominated symbolic order. According to de Beauvoir, women have historically been defined not as autonomous beings but in relation to men, who occupy the position of the absolute Subject: "*He is the Subject, he is the Absolute she is the Other*" (de Beauvoir, 1989, p. 26). This conceptualization positions women as dependent, passive, and subordinate depriving them of agency and reducing them to roles determined by patriarchal norms.

In literary contexts, this framework is particularly useful for analyzing representations of female characters who are denied voice, freedom, and identity outside of their function within male narratives. De Beauvoir's insights will guide the exploration of how the female protagonists in both texts are initially constructed as "Others," and how this positioning affects their ability to assert subjectivity or autonomy.

2.2 Existentialist Perspective: Jean-Paul Sartre's *Mauvaise foi* (Bad Faith)

Complementing de Beauvoir's feminist theory, Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy offers a framework for understanding the psychological dimension of identity suppression. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre introduces the concept of *mauvaise foi* or bad faith which describes the condition in which individuals evade the responsibility of their inherent freedom by conforming to externally imposed roles. Sartre writes that bad faith is "*a lie to oneself within the unity of a single consciousness*" (Sartre, 2003, p. 70), wherein individuals deceive themselves into believing they are fixed entities rather than free agents.

This concept is particularly valuable in analyzing how women internalize patriarchal roles and live inauthentically under socially sanctioned identities. In literary narratives, characters who operate in bad faith often display outward conformity while suppressing their own desires and potential. Sartre's framework allows for a deeper interrogation of the internal conflicts faced by female characters as they navigate between imposed roles and the

existential demand for authentic selfhood.

Taken together, these two theoretical perspectives provide a robust analytical structure for examining how female characters in *My Last Duchess* and *A Doll's House* experience and respond to systems of gendered control. De Beauvoir's feminist critique of woman's social othering and Sartre's existential analysis of bad faith will be employed to explore how the protagonists' subjectivities are shaped, suppressed, or reclaimed within their respective patriarchal contexts.

3. Conceptual Framework: Mapping Female Agency through Feminist-Existentialist Lenses

3.1 Core Focus

This study investigates how female agency is represented, constrained, and potentially reclaimed in Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, using the combined lenses of feminist theory and existentialist philosophy. The analysis is grounded in Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "Other" and Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith), focusing on how patriarchal structures shape women's identities and how existential freedom emerges through the rejection of prescribed roles.

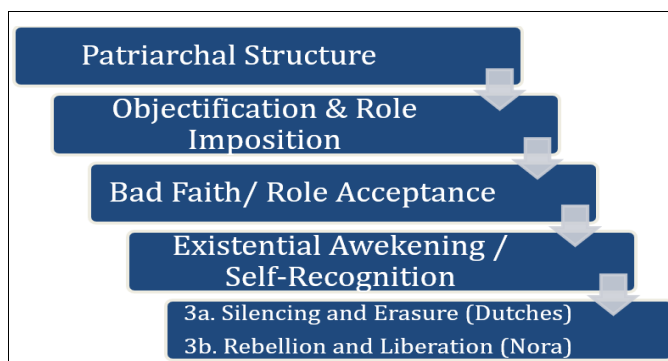
3.2 Key Concepts and Definitions

- **Female Agency:** The capacity of women to define themselves, make autonomous choices, and resist imposed roles (McNay, 2000).
- **Otherness:** The philosophical and social marginalization of women, defined in relation to men as the normative subject (de Beauvoir, 1989).
- **Bad Faith (*Mauvaise foi*):** A self-deceptive condition where individuals internalize externally imposed roles to avoid the burden of freedom (Sartre, 2003).
- **Authenticity:** The existential act of rejecting imposed identities and embracing self-defined existence (Sartre, 2007; de Beauvoir, 1989).

3.3 Literary Case Studies

- **My Last Duchess:** The Duchess exemplifies the silenced, aestheticized "Other" whose subjectivity is entirely suppressed within a patriarchal framework.
- **A Doll's House:** Nora Helmer begins in a state of bad faith but gradually awakens to her existential freedom, ultimately rejecting her gendered role and asserting her identity.

3.4 Agency as Process: A Comparative Model



This model conceptualizes agency as an emergent process. It highlights how characters move from internalized subjugation to self-awareness, with diverging outcomes: the Duchess is permanently silenced, while Nora actively reclaims her subjectivity.

3.5 Central Argument

This framework supports the argument that female agency is not innate but forged through resistance to patriarchal roles and recognition of existential freedom. While the Duchess remains trapped in objectification and denied subjecthood, Nora breaks from bad faith and asserts herself as a free, self-determining being. This study identifies Nora as a literary alter ego of the Duchess representing a possible evolution from passive object to autonomous subject. Through this lens, the paper reveals how literature articulates both the constraints on and the transformative potential of female agency within gendered power structures.

4. The Duchess Silenced into Objecthood

Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* dramatizes the complete annihilation of female agency under patriarchal possession. The Duke's monologue reveals not only his obsessive control over the Duchess's actions but also his desire to dominate her inner life her feelings, her expressions, and her desires. Like a true patriarchal figure, he believes he bestowed a supreme favour upon the Duchess by marrying her and giving her his "nine-hundred-years-old name." His inability to understand the Duchess's "easy ways" reflects both his insecurity and authoritarian rigidity. Too haughty to express his dissatisfaction directly, he instead allows his jealousy to fester, considering her to be no more than one of his possessions like any of his art pieces.

His chilling brutality and tyranny are compressed in just eight words:

"I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together."
(Lines 45-46)

These lines suggest the abrupt and final silencing of a woman whose only "fault" was innocent joy. Earlier, the Duke complains:

"She had A heart how shall I say? too soon made glad."
(Lines 21-22)

From an existential perspective, the Duchess is denied transcendence. She is killed and preserved as an art piece—a living/dead object incapable of creating any threat to the Duke's fragile ego. The act of "curtaining" her portrait further illustrates his ultimate control: he can now determine who sees her, when, and how, a power he could not exert during her life. His cold and stiff dignity renders him incapable of appreciating the purity and spontaneity of the Duchess, who found joy in life's simple pleasures.

From a feminist angle, the Duchess is emblematic of the Victorian "cult of domesticity," which demanded that women embody silence, submission, and ornamental passivity. Her fate is a true picture of a patriarchal society that saw female vitality as disorderly, where the only acceptable woman was one who could not smile, laugh, or express any inner feelings. Ultimately, the Duchess becomes a tragic reminder of the patriarchal imperative to reduce women to silent beauty devoid of agency, voice, or subjectivity.

5. Nora Helmer: Reclaiming Subjectivity through Existential Revolt

Nora Helmer's arc in *A Doll's House* sharply contrasts with the Duchess's fate, unfolding as a radically different narrative of liberation and existential self-discovery. Initially ensconced within the domestic sphere, Nora performs the role of the devoted wife and mother, internalizing the infantilization demanded by Torvald. For years, she obeys a social code that requires her complete subordination. However, a time comes when she realizes that all the sacrifices in her marriage have been hers alone. Her husband, despite his affectionate language, proves egocentric and moralistically hollow.

This revelation culminates in his reaction to Nora's forgery an act of love meant to save his life. Rather than expressing gratitude, he laments:

"You have ruined all my future." (Ibsen, 68)

This betrayal triggers Nora's existential awakening. She recognizes that her marriage has been a performance, a "doll's house", where her worth is contingent upon obedience and appearance. Her famous declaration,

"I believe that I am, first and foremost, a human being like you or anyway, that I must try to become one" (Ibsen, 68), signals her entry into existential authenticity. Her decision to leave is neither selfish nor utopian but a rational assertion of selfhood. She rejects the role of the "doll-wife" and embraces the anguish of freedom, in line with Sartre's description of the human being as "condemned to be free."

Nora's door slam reverberates as a seismic rupture not only in her own life but in the ideological foundations of nineteenth-century gender roles. In choosing to walk out, she breaks free from the spatial, social, and psychological confinement of her "doll's house." Her action symbolizes the feminine revolt against male domination and challenges the patriarchal narrative that women should exist only through others' desires.

6. Nora as the Duchess's Alter Ego: A Speculative Parallel

Reading Nora as the Duchess's existential alter ego offers a powerful interpretive lens through which these two characters and their respective texts can be re-evaluated. Both women initially inhabit decorative roles: prized for their beauty, charm, and compliance. Both transgress, albeit unintentionally, the narrow boundaries patriarchal society imposes upon them. Both are subjected to the male gaze and evaluated as aesthetic objects, existing to be seen, not heard. However, while the Duchess is silenced eternally framed in a painting Nora dramatically walks out of the frame. She transforms herself from object to subject, shattering the expectations that confine her. In this sense, *A Doll's House* can be read as a counterfactual redemption of the Duchess's tragedy a speculative realization of the autonomy denied to her literary predecessor.

Nora's rebellion reflects not only individual transformation but also a larger historical shift: the emergence of modern female subjectivity forged through direct confrontation with patriarchal structures. She embodies the possibility of what the Duchess might have become had she survived and resisted. Thus, Nora stands as a literary successor to the Duchess, bridging the gap between Victorian repression and modernist liberation.

7. Broader Context: From Victorian Constraints to Modernist Liberation

The divergent paths of the Duchess and Nora align with broader cultural transformations. Browning's *My Last Duchess* is firmly rooted in the Victorian ideology that confined women to the private sphere, demanding submission, purity, and ornamental passivity. In that world, women were not individuals but possessions—objects meant to reflect the glory of their male guardians. The Cult of Domesticity praised the “angel in the house” while punishing those who deviated from these roles. Transgressive women, like the Duchess, were silenced literally or metaphorically for disturbing the aesthetic and moral order. In contrast, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* anticipates the existentialist and feminist revolutions of the twentieth century. Nora's rebellion disrupts essentialist conceptions of womanhood and asserts the need for self-definition beyond domestic identity. Ibsen's play tells women to stand up, question their roles, and reclaim control over their lives. Nora's act of leaving her husband's home is a radical gesture against a male-dominated society that limits women's existence to serving others. Thus, *My Last Duchess* and *A Doll's House* are not merely literary works; they are symbolic markers in a cultural transition from the aestheticization and silencing of women to their philosophical and political self-liberation. They embody the shift from Victorian constraints to modernist assertions of identity, autonomy, and resistance.

8. Conclusion

Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* provide deeply contrasting meditations on female agency within patriarchal regimes. The Duchess, aestheticized and silenced, becomes a cautionary figure a woman reduced to an object under the totalizing control of male authority. She epitomizes the perils of unchecked dominance, where women are denied voice, freedom, and selfhood. Nora, on the other hand, embodies the emancipatory potential of feminist-existentialist revolt. She moves from submission to self-realization, dramatizing the existential principle that true freedom requires the risk of choice and the courage to assert one's own being. Her awakening represents the rejection of roles defined by others and the embrace of individual authenticity. By drawing on de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the “Other” and Sartre's notion of *mauvaise foi*, this paper has foregrounded the evolving spectrum of female resistance. Viewing Nora as the Duchess's existential alter ego allows us to reimagine a future where the framed object transforms into a speaking subject where silenced beauty becomes vocal agency. The resonance of their stories persists, reminding us that the struggle for authentic existence remains both a fundamental human imperative and a profoundly feminist concern. These literary women, though shaped by their historical contexts, continue to speak urgently to the questions of identity, autonomy, and liberation in our time.

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