



Unravelling the Visibly Invisible in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*: Krogstad, a Contemporary Antagonist or a Saviour Grossly Misunderstood?

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Abstract:

Krogstad, the mass consensus proclaimed antagonist, who visits the Helmers only to bring a flurry of disruption and catastrophe comes off as someone greater than what he is deemed to be. The critics of the play, that ends with Nora Helmer leaving the house, her children

and her husband, had for ages single-handedly antagonised Krogstad as the lone, villainous figure who had brought a massive sledgehammer upon the glass house of the Helmers shattering every corner towards a marital disaster that ended with more than just a bang and whimper. What the sympathisers of the couple failed to notice is that their marriage had been nothing less of a sham; with Torvald playing the ultra-domineering husband in the marriage and Nora, his wife being the caged bird that sang to every beck and call of her master. The Helmers never had a marital relationship that was founded on trust and understanding, instead it was all make-believe to dupe naïve people like Dr Rank. Krogstad acts as the only potential force who not only unveils the shroud off the seemingly cheerful domestic life but also brings forth the debate whether he is 'the antagonist' or merely an overburdened soul grossly misunderstood?

Keywords: A Doll's House, Nils Krogstad, antagonist, misunderstood, debate on character

Every story-line, be it a novel or drama has one of those many characters, who play a very significant role in shaping and transforming the lives of others within the walls of performativity along with initiating a chain of actions that finally culminate towards the climax of the play. Nils Krogstad is of such immense potential, who has a tremendous impact and influence upon the lives of not only Nora Helmer, the heroine of the play but also other major and minor characters alike. According to Egan, Krogstad an 'outsider' in the play acquires the most significant position when it comes to affecting the play and its story-line. Ibsen being the iconoclastic moralist he is, avoids the usual and conventional stock sequential trope of a heroine, hero and a villain while creating a realistic, life-like characters who are an admixture of good and evil alike. Krogstad appears in the first act of the play when Nora Helmer's childhood friend Mrs. Linde is visiting her, the mood is set for the season of festivity with a Christmas tree waiting to be

decorated. Krogstad's visit to the Helmers' brings about a storm and fury of destruction shattering Nora's comfortable past and present to a debris of shattered dream. Nora's outlandishly defensive behaviour at his appearance, "You? What is it? What do you want to speak to my husband about?" (Ibsen 172), raises suspicion and brings forth the question as to what might be the relationship between the two. Although Krogstad's nonchalant manner of response as to sorting out on 'bank-matters' pacifies the brewing anxiety within the heart of Nora it does little to hide the distant chaos in formation. Krogstad pays a visit to the Helmers' when he is conscious of Torvald's decision to expel him from the bank while con-incidentally it is Kristine Linde, his former lover who is to replace him as she had come to the town after being recently widowed, in prospects of a job for livelihood.

KROGSTAD: My sons are growing older; for their sake I must try to reclaim all the social respectability I can. (Ibsen 181)

Krogstad's conversation with Nora brings about the brighter and positive aspect of him as his fatherly and responsible nature is revealed unlike Torvald Helmer, Nora's husband who is all bark and no bite. Krogstad's blackmailing of Nora might be deemed as inhumane and boorish yet it is the society that is to be blamed for what has become of Krogstad. "The cynical social pariah" (Egan 7), Krogstad's condition of being a bondman and a lawyer and resorting to doing all other sorts of jobs is painfully a product of the rising bourgeoisie which Ibsen had tried to project. A man running all helter-skelter doing a myriad job in order to feed his children is indeed a pitiful sight and a consequence of the society that had dispossessed and disposed of him. This brings to the fore the most important question of the decade in concern, the unequal distribution of wealth and assets as a result of capitalism. Societal deviancy and irresponsibility crop up as the prime reasons behind cases like these where a single father has to resort to illegal means just as a woman is compelled to in terms of prostitution, to earn enough to sustain for themselves and their family. Ibsen being the realist, had superbly

masterminded the creation of a plot where characters like Nora, Torvald and Krogstad converge and diverge not fitting into the typecast of the ordinary framework.

Krogstad is an easily misunderstood character who despite his previous help during a period of crisis is detested by Nora, cynically lampooned by Rank, not given an opportunity by Torvald as a former friend of his, only to be understood by Mrs Linde. Krogstad's presence in the play, works not only as a catalyst who moves the story-line towards a catastrophic end of marriage for Torvald and Nora but also acts as a tool of 'anagnorisis' who helps Nora to come to terms with the reality of the doll-house she is living in. Krogstad's dynamicity is a boon for he unravels the unsavoury themes of pretentiousness in love and marriage, hypocrisy in household affairs, decay and degradation of virtues, disregard for emotions, loss of faith and trust between partners and the quest for the spirit of feminine freedom and position in the society as accord to Nora and Kristine.

The revelation of the fatal letter that simultaneously brings about Nora's act of forgery (Ibsen 183) and the subsequent act of Torvald's revelation of his true colours does indeed impart Krogstad, a position of utmost importance in the play. Nora's make-believe and imagined status of her conjugal life comes to a tumultuous and cataclysmic end as she realizes how selfish and self-centred of an ultra-masculine, obsessed possessive husband Torvald is. The 'twittering' 'skylark' of a Nora who had perceived of Torvald to be her saviour from the crisis posed by Krogstad finally realizes she had lived with a strange man for 'eight years' and had borne him 'three children'. Krogstad being ousted during the direst of his financial conditions by Torvald becomes embittered and emboldened in his attempt to avenge himself as he wouldn't "end up down in the dirt again. (Ibsen 181)" Krogstad acts as a foil to Torvald, and as a tool of anagnorisis like Hamlet and Oedipus, who indirectly enables Nora to tear off the adamant chains of self-sacrifice, passivity and not being at the receiving end of her marital

life into emancipation and self-exploration from being the 'doll-child' and 'doll-wife' of her father and husband respectively. Kristine and Krogstad, who had previously been separated due to financial constraints get together yet once again as partners for life.

Krogstad is a classic figure of unjust and unjustifiable misunderstanding, who not only helps Nora realize the truth about her husband's prevaricate personality but also repairs a previously-broken relationship with Mrs Linde. In the same way, Nora finally shakes herself off the numerous marital shackles Torvald had clipped herself to while Kristine is able to get back with Krogstad yet once again, an opportunity lost due to marital incompatibility caused by financial uncertainty on Krogstad's part. Krogstad on that level is on a similar plane as that of Dr Stockmann¹, who despite being the only one to think about the well-being of the public gets wrongfully labelled as a traitor as he loses his stand and support to the higher-ups of the society just as Krogstad does lose his stand to people like Torvald who would only reap when the season is fine while abandon when things turn unfavourable. The majority consensus regarding Krogstad being the antagonist and home-wrecker evolves from similar views shared by characters like Dr Rank and Nora. Torvald becomes the only source to verify and similarly, vilify Krogstad at the same time, laying the foundation for Krogstad being vulnerable to the truth regarding his psyche and person in actuality, which unfortunately only Kristine is able to understand. From being labelled as a moral deviant to a corrupt individual of the society Krogstad rises above all those imposed pseudo-diagnosed societal restrictions into a reformed and transformed character whose untainted, unblemished love for his family and to provide for them triumphs over his initial sinfully sinister mask which had terrified Nora out of her wits. What Nora as a mother and wife had blindingly eluded and ignored throughout, is brought to the fore as she is forced to be confronted with an opportunist husband and a pathetically crafted illusion of a family,

¹ Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts and Other Plays* (Penguin,1964)196

all of which had been possible only because of Krogstad. In one way or another the curse of Krogstad left Nora not with the omen of a stifled, regrettable life rather one that opened to her the 'door' of escape unto independence and self-exploration.

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