

---

**From Passive Figure to Proactive Agents: Women's Existentialism Awakening in *The Flies* and *A Doll's House***<sup>1</sup>**Sunita Ghate**

Research Scholar, PGTD, Department of English, Nagpur University, Nagpur

<sup>2</sup>**Dora Thompson**

Research Supervisor

**Abstract**

This research paper examines the existential awakening of female characters in Jean-Paul Sartre's, *The flies* (1943), Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), focusing on how Electra and Nora's are attempted to transition from passive roles defined by social and patriarchal constraints to proactive agents who assert their freedom and authenticity. Sartrean existentialism, which emphasises individual freedom, responsibility, and the rejection of bad faith. The analysis compares the characters' journey, highlighting similarities in their initial subjugation and divergences in their outcomes. Through close textual analysis, the paper argues that while both plays depict women's potential for existential liberation, structural and psychological barriers often hinder the full realisation of agency, thereby offering insights into feminist existentialism.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, feminism, women's awakening, freedom and responsibility, vulnerability and empowerment

**Introduction**

The portrayal of women in literature has long been dominated by conventional representations of passivity. As a result, female characters serve as foils to male protagonists or symbols of domestic confinement. In *The Flies* by Jean-Paul Sartre and *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, women are portrayed not only as victims, but as individuals facing existential dilemmas that shape their journey toward self-realisation. The central problem addressed in this paper is existential subjugation of women and patriarchal and social structures that enforce inauthenticity, reducing them to passive figures who live in 'bad-faith' a Sartrean concept, denoting the denial of one's fundamental freedom through self-deceptive consciousness. In these plays, Electra and Nora represent this struggle, initially conforming to roles imposed by family, gods, or husband's expectations. Subsequently to confront the inner conflict of freedom and the responsibility to act authentically.

This problem is deeply significant as it brings feminine theory into dialogue with existential philosophy, and highlights that women's operation is not merely social, but also rooted in human condition of freedom and responsibility. In an era where gender equality continues to be challenged, analysing these awakenings exposes the psychological and

ethical consequences of an authenticity and offers a blueprint for empowerment. Sartre's existentialism, influenced by his partnership with Simone de Beauvoir, posits that women, like men, must prove their existence through action and decision-making, challenges, traditional notion of femininity as passive. Ibsen's plays though written my earlier, raise questions about women's freedom and self-determination that are central to modern feminist debates. Because they challenge traditional gender roles in Waze that are still relevant today, these dramas continue to function as lasting and meaningful critics of gender inequality.

Scholars have widely discussed existential themes in both plays, though comparative analysis is relatively rare. For *A Doll's House*, critics such Toril Moi argue that Henrik Ibsen portrays women "philosophers in skirts". According to Moi, the play presents women not merely as victims of social oppression, but as philosophical thinkers, whose understanding of freedom and identity develops through lived experience and ethical struggle rather than through abstract intellectual discourse. The existential interpretations of *A Doll's House* view, Naraaz final decision as an authentic act of self-realisation. By rejecting social norms, she seeks a personal truth, rooted in lad experience, recognises the falseness of her earlier life, and actively chooses to define ourselves through freedom and responsibility. Critics read. *The Flies* as a philosophical drama in which Sartre uses Greek myth to convey existential ideas of freedom and responsibility within the political context of Nazi occupied France while the play promotes freedom as resistance to imposed guilt, Electra ultimately fails to achieve existential authenticity because she retreats into remorse, surrendering her freedom rather than embracing responsibility. Comparative studies examining female roles in modernist drama. Identify similarities in how both characters resist, divine or paternal authority, while highlighting differences in the strength and consistency of their resolve to sustain this challenge. The feminist critics, such as Michele Le Doeuff argue that existentialism relies on masculine imagery that does not fully represent women's live experiences. However, Sartre's literary works partially respond to this critique by portraying female characters like Electra, who struggle and failure reveal the emotional and ethical limits of existential freedom when applied to women's lives.

This paper argues that although both Electra and Nora awaken to existential self-awareness, only Nora successfully realises authentic freedom through decisive action. Electra's inability to sustain awakening reveals how guilt and societal conditioning limit women's capacity to bear existential responsibility, exposing the gendered constraints within existential philosophy. By comparing their journeys, this analysis demonstrates that how existentialism, when applied to women, must take intersecting forms of oppression into account, ultimately advocating proactive self -creation as a path, to liberation.

### **Existentialism – A Framework for Women's Awakening**

Existentialism, as articulated by Jean- Paul Sartre, argues that existence precedes essence. Human beings are not born with fixed or predetermined natures; rather, they create themselves through their choices and actions. Central to this philosophy is the concept of "bad faith". When individuals avoid responsibility by conforming to roles imposed by others or society, thereby denying their inherent freedom. When applied to women, this framework

intersects with feminist thought. Influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's, Sartre's ideas highlight how patriarchal structures encourage inauthenticity by positioning women as the 'other'. As a result, women are compelled to awaken to their agency and assert their freedom through conscious self-definition.

In *The Flies*, Sartre adapts the Orestes myth to illustrate existential themes in Nazi-occupied France, freedom functions as resistance against remorse enforced by divine and political power. Electra's initial passivity arises from her confinement within Argos's culture of guilt; however, her encounter with Orestes ignites the possibility of an existential awakening. Similarly, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, though written before the formal emergence of existentialism, anticipates its core principles through Nora's rejection of bourgeois domesticity. Critics highlight Henrik Ibsen's humanist perspective, in which characters such as Nora's represent the anguish of self-definition, resonating with Sartre's focus on responsibility.

Both plays depict women's existential journeys as battles against inauthenticity: Electra against Divine manipulation, Nora's resistance against marital subjugation. This framework allows for a comparative lens, revealing how women's awakenings are shaped by context-mythical versus realistic- yet remain unified by the pursuit of proactive agency.

### **Nora's Transformation in *A Doll's House***

In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora Helmer is initially presented as a passive figure. She reflected the Victorian ideal of the submissive wife. Treated as a 'doll' by her husband Torvald who calls her his "little skylark" and "squirrel". Nora initially internalizes this role, engaging in childlike behaviour, such as hiding macaroons and begging for money: "you might give me money. Torvald, only just as much as you can afford." Her actions reflect bad faith, as she performs happiness in a "playroom" marriage. She admitting later, "I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa's doll-child".

Nora's awakening unfolds through acts of secret Independence, that expose cracks in her passivity. To save, Torvald's life, she forges her father's signature to secure loan independently to obtain the money herself and, repaying it through secretly. Experiencing a sense of agency she describes as feeling "like a man". This act of deception marks Nora's first active assertion of agency. As she tells Christine Linde, "it was I who procured the money", directly challenging social norms that deny women, financial autonomy. Yet this step independence is accompanied by deep anguish. when confronted with Krogstad's blackmail, Nora declares, "I'm not afraid of you any longer," signaling her growing resolve.

The climax of her existential awakening occurs in act three, where Nora confronts Torvald after he discovers her forgery. Rejecting his conditional forgiveness, she declares, "I must stand quite alone, if I am to understand myself and everything about me". This proactive assertion of freedom results in her departure: "I believe that before all else, I am a reasonable human being, just as you are-or, at least, that I must try and become one." Nora's slamming of the door symbolises a rejection of inauthenticity, embracing responsibility for

her existence. Scholars interpret this as an existential triumph., where Nora chooses subjective truth or social expectations, redefining herself beyond wife, and mother.

Nora's journey demonstrates how existential awakening enables women to emerge as proactive agents, even at the cost of social isolation. Her transformation from a passive. "doll" into an autonomous individual anticipates feminist existentialism by for grounding choice as a central means of liberation.

### **Electra's partial awakening in *The Flies***

Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Flies* reinterprets the Electra myth through an existential framework, presenting Electra I say women defined to passivity within Argos's pervasive culture of remorse. At the outset, she engages in a form of passive rebellion against her mother Clytemnestra and her stepfather Agistheus, imagining revenge without translating it into action. Dressed in rags to protest the city's guilt, she tells Orestes," I waste no words on these haggard sluts; but my gestures speak for me. When I came down to the palace courtyard with my breast bared, all eyes are lowered." Resistance remains largely performative and is grounded in bad faith, as she waits for a savior rather than assuming responsibility through decision action.

Electra's encounter with Orestes ignites her proactive potential. She urges him to murder Aegisthus, participating in the plot and celebrating the act: At last-a murder! Now I can breathe freely. This moment marks her awakening, as she rejects the gods' imposed guilt, aligning with Sartre's theme that freedom arises from concrete situations. Unlike Nora's solitary struggle, Electra's agency is collective; yet she proclaims 'I'm free, beyond anguish, beyond remorse. Free.' However, Electra's awakening collapses after the murder. Consumed by remorse, she yields to the Furies, crying, "Orestes! It is now that you are bringing guilt upon you. For who but yourself can know what you really wanted?" while Orestes embraces his freedom, bearing the Flies (symbols of guilt) himself. Electra retreats, choosing conformity instead of authenticity. Critics, where this as a failed existential transformation, where Electra's gendered vulnerability-rooted in maternal betrayal and social expectations-prevents full agency.

Electra's arc highlights the challenges of women's existential awakening in a mythical, oppressive framework, where proactive impulses yield to internalised guilt.

### **Comparative Analysis – Parallels and Divergences**

Comparing Electra and Nora discloses striking parallels in their existential journeys from passivity to potential agency, yet divergences emphasize gendered constraints. Both begin as passive figures: Nora in her Doll-House, Electra in remorseful Argos, conforming to roles that deny their freedom. Their awakenings involve deception and action-Nora's forgery and Electra's provocation to murder-challenging authority (Torvald/Zeus). Existentially, they confront anguish: Nora's "Wonderful thing" (self realisation) mirrors Electra's "freedom lights it's beacon". Yet, outcomes differ. Nora achieves proactive agency, leaving to self-educate, embodying Sartre's radical freedom. Electra, however, retreats, unable to bear responsibility, revealing how mythical guilt intensifies women's

subjugation when compared with Ibsen's realistic critique. This contrast suggests that while existentialism offers liberation, women's paths are complicated by intersecting oppressions, as de Beauvoir might argue. Comparatively, both plays advocates for authenticity, but Electra's failure critiques incomplete awakenings within patriarchal framework.

### Conclusion

In *The Flies* and *A Doll's House*, Sartre and Ibsen portray women's existential awakenings as transformative yet conflicted processes, moving from passive conformity toward proactive self-creation. Nora's achievement and Electra's partial failure reveal the potential and pitfalls of freedom, urging feminist existentialism that addresses gendered constraints. That every human being is not similar in their ability to take existential agency, and that factors such as personal resilience, social and contextual forces, shape the degree to which individuals may assume and sustain freedom. For example, Nora's personal resilience shines through her decisive act of forgery and her final act of closing the door on marriage, demonstrating a capacity to endure isolation and uncertainty in pursuit of self-definition. In contrast, Electra's retreat into remorse following the murder demonstrates how social pressures-embodied by the mythical Furies and the culture of guilt in Argos, leading her to abandon her proactive role and revert to passivity. Contextual influences further differentiate their paths: Nora operates in a realistic, bourgeois setting where individual action can lead to personal liberation, though a considerable cost, whereas Electra's mythic environment, saturated with divine interventions and collective remorse, intensifies psychological obstacles that hinder sustained agency. These instances emphasize that existential growth is uneven; some, like Nora, harness inner strength to defy norms, whereas others, like Electra, yield to external and internalized pressures. Moving beyond the place., modern parallels emerge in real-world figures, such as Malala Yousafzai, who is resilience against social operation in Pakistan empowered her to assert agency through education and activism. In contrast to woman living under restrictive regime, who, despite early awakening, confront overwhelming contextual barriers that compound a return to conformity. Ultimately, these insides remain significant., urging readers to accept responsibility amid oppression, acknowledge where capacities of existential growth, and advocate for environment that nurture freedom.

### References

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.
- Catalano, Joseph S. "Sartre's *The Flies*: Freedom and Responsibility." *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1986, pp. 1-15. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/23123645.
- Gusain, Ph. D. "The Enquiry of Apathy and Existential Anguish in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*." *Language in India*, vol. 12, no. 6, June 2012, pp. 1-12.

- 
- Hardiyanti, Yuni. "Nora's Subjectivity in Ibsen's A Doll's House (1879): An Existentialist Approach." Academia.edu, 2019.
- Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. Translated by Rolf Fjelde, Signet Classics, 1992.
- Le Doeuff, Michèle. "Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism." *Feminist Review*, no. 51, Autumn 1995, pp. 1-17. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/1395455.
- Thody, Philip. "Ethics in Sartre's Existentialist Drama: A Study of The Flies and Men Without Shadows." ResearchGate, 2024,
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes, Washington Square Press, 1956.
- No Exit and Three Other Plays*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert and Lloyd Alexander, Vintage International, 1989. (Includes The Flies.)
- Templeton, Joan. "The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen." *PMLA*, vol. 104, no. 1, Jan. 1989, pp. 28-40. Modern Language Association,
- Mocbil, Ahmed Saeed Ahmed. "The Portrayal of Women in Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House." *Journal of Social Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, July 2023, pp. 140-157. University of Science and Technology,
- Moi, Toril. *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*. Oxford UP, 2006.
- Panichella, Noelle. *The Problems of Shame and Guilt in Sartre's The Flies*. Rutgers University--Camden, May 2008. RUcore,
- Patel, Aishwarya, and Shalini Sharma. "Tenets of Existential Feminism in Ibsen's Play, A Doll's House." *International Journal of Research in all Subjects in Multi Languages*, vol. 10, no. 6, June 2022, pp. 25-28. RET Academy for International Journals of Multidisciplinary Research,