

“From Un-concealment to Nothingness: Nihilism in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and Zainabu Jallo’s *Onions Make Us Cry*”

Chigbu Andrew Chigbu, Gideon Uzoma Umezurike, Chibuzo Onunkwo*

Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author: Chibuzo Onunkwo, E-mail: Chibuzo.onunkwo@unn.edu.ng

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ABSTRACT

Despite the century and three-decade gap between them, Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and Zainabu Jallo’s *Onions Make Us Cry* have often been studied for their indebtedness to two movements that have shaped human history and conditioned contemporary thoughts: the former as a play that inaugurates the modernist discourse in literature and pioneered the feminist subject, and the latter expressively reflecting this gender-based discourse. However, the position of this study is that aside the woman question, the texts share some other important elements. They both provoke the question of being and existence: the being of human reality and of truth. In Ibsen and Jallo, we witness Nora’s and Malinda’s experience of existential structures, their perspectival grappling with the perceptual realities of their existence, the psychological alteration that comes with this ontic awareness, and how the perception of ‘what is’ moves one to revolt against ‘what has been’. The plays are seen as capturing nihilism, what Cunningham calls the unmaking of formed things and the making of formless things. This essay is thus an existential explication of the “speak out” phenomenon as the culmination of a long but unsteady process of existential change which, in both plays, climaxes in the embracing of nihilism. Our inquiry is, therefore, grounded on an existential phenomenological approach derived from Nietzschean and Heideggerian philosophies.

Key words: Existence, Phenomena, Unconcealment, Becoming, Nihilism, Authenticity, Potentiality

INTRODUCTION

There is no shortage of critical appraisal of Henrik Ibsen’s works. “The most widely performed dramatist in the world after Shakespeare” (Henrik Ibsen—Book Launch), his *A Doll’s House* is so countlessly read that a whole body of literature could be sourced from it. Thus we are faced with the haunting question, why another reading of *A Doll’s House*? In other words, what is new in *A Doll’s House*? The answer is simply this: Nothing. We do not intend to rewrite the text, to insert what has not been there, but to bring up this 19th century play in relation to Zainabu Jallo’s *Onions Make Us Cry*; this entails placing both the modernist (if not the post-modernist) and the contemporary, the European and the African in the context of being, with central focus on nihilism as the starting point of authenticity.

One central idea which critics are fast to point out in *A Doll’s House*, as in *Onions Make Us Cry* alike, is the quest for self-discovery which has become ever now prevalent since modernism. Like his many other works, Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* is often understood as a play in the modernist mode. As such the work has been conceived as perpetuating a breaking off with tradition, a departure in search

of knowledge. Prince Ihemegbulam (2015) wrote that, this departure “is the search for knowledge which Nora engages in, the truth about existence., the fact of man’s quest for truth, the task. which Nora must take up to discover things for herself” (p. 29). While no previous study has linked *Onions Make Us Cry* with this modernist vision, nor brought the two texts under one context of analysis, many of the critics who have studied Ibsen and the few reviews on the award-winning play of Jallo emphasize the texts’ portrayal of the human potential for self-determination which is sequel to self-discovery.

However, a dominant issue that seems to have stolen the attention of many critics of *A Doll’s House* is whether Ibsen crafted the play with a feminist intention or whether his Nora is a symbolic representation of everyman (i.e. humanity in general). For Andrew Finch and Park-Finch, *A Doll’s House* portrays the feminist advocacy of women’s right for self-expression. The play, they argue, “opened the way to the turn-of-the-century women’s movement,” this pioneering role being signified in Nora’s “closing the door on her husband and children” (p. 4). On the other hand, R. M. Adams (1957) believes that though its main character, Nora is “a woman

imbued with the idea of becoming,” the text proposes nothing categorical about women; for Adams, the real theme of the play “has nothing to do with the sexes” but with humanity in general (p. 416). Thus Einar Haugen insists that “Nora is not just a woman arguing for liberation; she is me. She embodies the comedy as well as the tragedy of modern life” (as cited in Joan Templeton, 1989, p. 28). Templeton, nevertheless, takes up issues with this relegation of feminism to an inessential position in the play. For her, dismissing women’s right as the subject of *A Doll’s House* is a gentlemanly refusal to acknowledge the existence of a tiresome reality (p. 29). Templeton further argues that despite Ibsen’s disavowal of having consciously written with a feminist vision, “*A Doll’s House* is not about Everybody’s struggle to find him- or herself but, about Everywoman’s struggle against Everyman” (1989, p. 36).

This debate, however, has found no footing in *Jallo’s Onions Make Us Cry*. Critics of Jallo’s work seem to have taken quite a unanimous position on the central issue portrayed in the play. They seem without doubt that the 2010 play is about women’s struggle in a male-dominated world. Ezinne Igwe (2015) looks at the play as a portrayal of how women struggle in silence while enduring the brutalities of marriage and bottling up these brutalities for the sake of protecting their family image. She sees this bottling up of grievances as leading to psychosis and even insanity, “both psychological imbalances which, although mild in most cases, could birth domestic violence in exceptional ones” (p. 19). Igwe opines that *Onions Make Us Cry* not only portrays domestic violence against women, explaining the many tears women shed in their closets and the swollen eyes outsiders see, the many bumps on their faces and the black eyes they nurse, but also advocates for a speak out against any such marital brutality (2015, p. 23). This “speak out”, for Igwe, is signified in the latter self-assertion of Lola against her husband; for the readers of Ibsen, it is the sudden psychological growth of Nora and her walking out on her family that connote this “speak out” (Ihemegbulam, 2015, p. 29).

Notwithstanding, in this essay, we do not presume to pin down these texts to either of the prevailing feminist or modernist interpretations which do not in themselves adequately explain the phenomenological dimensions of being in the plays. Consequently, our purpose herein lies in inquiring into the “speak out” phenomenon as the culmination of a long but unsteady process of existential change which, in both plays, climaxes in the embracing of nihilism.

EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE PLAYS

Existentialism is a loose movement made up of philosophers who, though averse to the term itself, still share in a common revolt against traditional philosophy (Walter Kaufmann, 1956, p. 11). A short list of thinkers who have been dubbed existentialist include Heidegger, Sartre, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty, Camus, Dostoevsky, etc. At the heart of the thoughts of these philosophers, Kaufmann notes, is “the refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and

especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life” (12). Invariably, most of these philosophers are also regarded as practising existential phenomenology, that is, practising existentialism through the methods of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology—the *science* of concrete experience from a first-person perspective (Dan Zahavi, p. 664). Mark A. Wrathall has observed that the justification for grouping these philosophers together under the heading “existential phenomenology” is grounded in the “commonalities in their understanding of the phenomena upon which they focus, and in the phenomenological method they use to account for such phenomena” (2006, p. 31). Ever since the idea of existential phenomenology caught wild fire during the middle of the twentieth century (Wrathall p. 31), it has vastly influenced the depth of literary criticism, even up to our twenty-first century, so much so that it has become popularised as a literary and critical theory. As a literary critical tool, “existential phenomenologies have included descriptions of the meaning of being (Heidegger), the role of the lived-body in perception (Merleau-Ponty), and skilful coping (Hubert Dreyfus)” wrote Wrathall (p. 31). In this study, therefore, we are especially concerned with the analytical descriptions of the meaning of being/existence as perceived from the first-person experience of the characters who, in their struggle to cope with the vicissitudes of their lives, embark on an unsteady process of becoming which, in both plays, climaxes in the embracing of Nietzschean nihilism.

AS BELIEVERS IN THE TRUE FAITH: BEFORE BECOMING

Perhaps, a most fundamental view of Dasein associated with Heideggerian ontology is the easy-to-understand notion which, though all too commonly known since antiquity, is well-captured in the phrase conveying the variability of Dasein as “a peculiarly fluid entity” (Michael Inwood 1999, p. 213). Lurking around this fluidity is the choice of authenticity or inauthenticity. Authenticity, for Heidegger, is Dasein’s ownmost potentiality; “it is about glimpsing and living towards one’s deepest potentials in life. It is not about honesty or sincerity as the normal English word will suggest. Rather, it is a kind of consonance between how one is living and what one can actually be, between one’s reality and one’s possibility” says Eric L. Dodson, 2014, n.p). In *Onions Make Us Cry* and *A Doll’s House*, we are bothered with the question of being: foremost of which is the being of humans (Dasein, in Heidegger’s terms) and the reality of perceived things (truth). However, the characters of the plays are seen for who they are, beings subject to the thrownness of human existence, and the accompaniment of this: the concealment of their ownmost potentiality for being.

Comparatively, Ibsen and Jallo present to us individual characters who grapple with the truth concealed from them, which is that they exist in the inauthentic mode of existence. Nora, for example, operates on the presumption that she is herself, that her life is in consonance with mineness. Yet, her daughterhood, just like her wifehood, is dominated by fear and timid subscription to the theories of others, firstly, her fa-

ther's and, later on, her husband's, with little or no attention paid to her ownmost thoughts. This she comes to perceive as a great injustice and laments thus: "I have been greatly wronged, Torvald—first by papa and then by you" (Ibsen, 1879, p. 74). Her conversation with the husband reads further:

Nora. It is perfectly true, Torvald. When I was at home with papa, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed from him I concealed the fact, because he would not have liked it. He called me his doll-child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls. And when I came to live with you—

Helmer. What sort of an expression is that to use about our marriage?

Nora (*undisturbed*). I mean that I was simply transferred from papa's hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste, and so I got the same tastes as yours, else I pretended to, I am really not quite sure which—I think sometimes the one and sometimes the other. When I look back on it, it seems to me as if I had been living here like a poor woman—just from hand to mouth. I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so. You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life. (p. 74)

As a daughter and husband, Nora subjects herself to the dictats of her father and husband even when these prescriptions are wrong. This is a denial of her ownmost potentiality. Without the freedom to make her own decisions and choices, her ontico-ontological-priority is shrouded. She is, like Malinda in *Onions Make Us Cry*, a woman who has fallen prey to other beings in the world; as such, she engages her concern on other beings (Heidegger, 1949, p.64).

Malinda's dotting devotion to her husband and her silence over the husband's brutality towards her strike us as a kind of self-negation, that which Sartre describes as bad faith. Bad faith describes the phenomenon whereby human beings under pressure from social forces adopt false values and disown their innate freedom, hence acting inauthentically. While man is a thrown being which fundamentally must begin with the they of one's world, existential philosophers "agree that man is not a mere object, in that he is a being which has a relational concern for its being" (cited in Gideon Uzoma Umezurike, 2015, p. 13). Man constantly lives in the mindfulness of his being and his ownmost potentiality. Yet there is the wilful handing over of oneself to another in spite of one's self. This, as we see in *Onions Make Us Cry*, occurs "when Dasein ... occupies itself entirely with its world of care and gives itself up to the publicity of the 'one like many', [such that] something like a flight of the Dasein from itself as from its authentic potentiality of self-Being reveals itself" (Heidegger 1949, p. 60, as cited in Umezurike, 2015, p. 2). Of course, Malinda's being married to Daniel Jandayi is not bad in itself; her taking the marital vows to be faithful and loyal to him is, in fact, a form of solicitous care for her being.

However, she overplays this loyalty in a way that haunts and endangers her being. She knows that her husband vi-

olently mistreats her, yet she sticks with him and conceals this reality from public glare, and raises her children "with a broken tooth, bruised limbs, cracked ribs, countless black eyes [and] shifted jaws" (Jallo, 2011, p. 27). This is because she cares so much about saving face, about what others will say concerning her marriage, than she does her own existential survival. And at the times her children's faces bring to her sentience the voice of conscience which calls her out from this preoccupation with the world of care, she mishears the call by letting it be "drawn by the they-self into a manipulative conversation with one's self [so that the call] is distorted" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 253). In ambiguity, she keeps comforting herself and her children with the words: "Daddy loves you" (Jallo, 2011, p. 27). Thus like Nora and Lola who are both married to husbands that maltreat them, the former verbally and the latter physically, Malinda goes on negating her ontico-ontological-priority while furthering the concealment of her ownmost potentiality. This concealment of truth, broken off only after a long duration of preyhood to the they-self, is shattered in the encountering of epiphanic moments, of existential apocalypse which, for both protagonists, Malinda and Nora, is sudden and dire, with cosmic force.

WHEN THE OBSCURE UNCONCEAL: THE KNOWN THINGS CONCEAL

The phenomenological arrival at discovery in *Onions Make Us Cry* and *A Doll's House* gives us reasons to think of self-awareness in the light of the concept of truth captured by the Classical Greek word *alétheia*, which translates as unconcealment or discovery (Amechi N. Akwanya, 2014, p. 44).

This discovery is not the unconcealment of things as they are, whole, in themselves; it is the revelation of things as they appear or occur to us. According to Julián Marías (1967) "the notion of 'true' and 'false' is based on the way in which the being of things is made patent or manifest. Truth and falsity exist only within the realm of truth in the broad sense, understood as *alétheia*, as discovery, unveiling or openness" (75). Thus, Dodson (2014, n.p) argues that the phenomenological truth of our being appear to us in much the same perspectival way that perceptual truths do: in terms of an ongoing process of revealing and concealing *rather than in terms of whether propositions do or do not correspond with reality*.

As Ibsen's Nora and Jallo's Malinda come to the grasping of the endangerment of their being, they each realize that they need to act in order to save themselves. Nora's witnessing her husband's reaction after reading Krogstad's letter makes her arrive at the understanding that she knows neither herself nor her husband. Thus like Malinda who realizes that she "cannot boast of knowing her[self]" (Jallo, 2011, p. 27), Nora discovers that she needs to educate herself on her own. "I must stand quite alone, if I am to understand myself and everything about me" (Ibsen, 1879, p. 75). However, this knowledge, truthful as it appears to them under their different circumstances, works to enshroud some other vital facts. It is, therefore, as J. R. Walls has it, "truth relies on a double concealment in which a light provides illumination for a clearing, an unconcealment of truth, which in its process

conceals that which surrounds the clearing" (2012, n.p). The grasping of this illumined truth, writes Akwanya, is "grounded in a temporal moment (*kairos*) of unconcealment and [is] thus marked by a unique historical unfolding" (p. 44).

Following at the heels of this unveiling of Nora's and Malinda's apriori responsibility for their ownmost being is the veiling of their sworn commitment to family and to the gods in their lives. As both protagonists apprehend their facticity and the truth of their ontico-ontological priority, the burden of morality is concealed from them. Conventional morality demands that Nora stick with her family regardless of her husband's egoistic behaviours towards her. But upon perceiving Helmer's cowardly, selfish unwillingness to rescue her from Krogstad's blackmail, Nora no longer sees him as lovable nor her moral debt as something worth paying. Leaving the family and jettisoning her God-given role as wife and mother has brought Nora "under direct siege as exhibiting the most perfidious characteristics of her sex; the original outcry of the 1880s is swollen now to a mighty chorus of blame. She is denounced as an irrational and frivolous narcissist; an "abnormal" woman, a "hysteric"; a vain, unloving egoist who abandons her family in a paroxysm of selfishness" (Templeton, 1989, p. 29).

Similarly, Nora has been a most obsequious wife to her husband, enduring his every whim and caprices, covering up his bipolar disorder from public glare, and hiding the fact that he is a wife-beater; she has been ready to go on living under him as a wife and as a mother to his children, but this is until insight strikes her, until she discovers that she stands to lose her life unless she acts. She tells Lola her reason for killing the man she loves: "He was going to kill me. [I] Smelt it. Discernment. It was different. He wasn't DJ anymore. His eyes told me so. He'd been completely possessed. The goblin who got his soul was the worst type" (Jallo, 2011, p. 38). Yet killing DJ is no less a crime against the law as is his beating her. While the principle of ethical egoism, which is a doctrine in human personality that individuals ought to act in their own self-interest (Alexander Moseley, 2005, n.p), seems to justify Malinda's spousicide, morality frowns upon her act of taking a life, her husband's life, the life of her children's father. But this truth—that by killing her husband she will be rendering her children fatherless—is shut out of sight at that epiphanic moment of her life best described by her as a moment of *truth* and *light* in which she discerned that either she or DJ "was going to be spiritually accompanied out of the sphere by some seraphic beings (Jallo, 2011, p. 31). This concealment is understood in the sense that truth is perspectival:

Think of exploring a dark room with a flashlight. As we flash the light in one corner, the other parts of the room are thrown into darkness. We could move the light to illuminate those other parts of the room, but then different regions of the room will be thrown into darkness. The truth of our being works in much the same way. Because we are radically in the world, our apprehension of the truth is always perceptual, a function of seeing from a certain point of view that is shaped by all the aspects and elements of our world embedded in us. Consequent-

ly, every truth that we experience also conceals other possible truths. (Dodson, 2014, n.p)

This begs the question: Is there anything like definite truth? How is truth validated?

In Hegel we hear of the term *absolute spirit* which is "a synthesis of subjective and objective spirit., of *nature* and *spirit*" (Marias, 1967, p. 327). This is not *spirit* in the sense of supernatural "entities which enter into themselves," Marias warns (1967, p. 328). *Nature* and *spirit* respectively delineate the being-in-itself (the something as it is) and our feeling or experience of it; and the common base between them is what Hegel calls *absolute spirit*, which is, "systematic thought in which each thing is true only as a function of the system" (Marias, 1967, p 328). What Malinda and Nora perceive as truth is only a perspectival manifestation of being, it is thought, "true only as a function of the system," in their cases, the existentialist system. With them being under the guide of existential illumination which not only repudiates tradition but also believes that "we must begin from the subjective" (Jean-Paul Sartre, 1956, p. 289), it is inevitable that the psychological growth of Nora and Malinda takes a sharp bend towards nihilism.

EMBRACING NIHILISM

Nihilism as a term hardly provokes a chain of favourable reaction in people, as it invokes dreadful images of despair and hopelessness. Ordinarily, the greater majority conceives of the idea as "the personal whim of inveterate negativists" (as cited Johan in Goudsblom, 1980, p. 140). This, perhaps, is due to the presence of the morpheme *nihil* which literally refers to the no-thing: that nothing has a value. "Nihilism is the logic of nothing as something, which claims that Nothing Is. [It is the] unmaking of things and [the] forming of formless things" (Conor Cunningham, 2002, p. 1). What though is this nothing that has no value? For the atheists (the likes of Nietzsche), God; for the feminist, patriarchy; for the communist, capitalism; for the colonized, colonialism. The list elongates, spanning into morality, truth, values, knowledge, being, and existence itself (Cunningham, 2002, p. 10). While Shawn A. Rubin (2002) conceives of nihilism as "the existential sense of nothingness and meaninglessness," a disease which antidote is "the will to power" (p. 53), in this work, we see nihilism as the starting point of the will to power.

The nihilistic attitude portrayed in *A Doll's House* and *Onions Make Us Cry* is allied with that of Will Slocombe, premised on the view that the *nihil* of nihilism is a creative one rather than merely a call for destruction. As Slocombe (2003) has written, "there is much more to nihilism than merely rage against Being or 'the destruction of Being,' and so the future of nihilism is not simply a nihilism of the future, 'a perception of the future in which all is bleak, but the means by which we admit Gianni Vattimo's call for philosophy today to recognise nihilism is our (only) chance' (p. 1). Malinda and Nora both embrace nihilism as their only chance of existential survival. In fact, we see the characters' "highest values devalue themselves" as they set upon critiquing and cross-examining these values (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1968, p. 9). For instance, Nora who has at first

believed in her moral duties as wife and husband now turns around to question this value:

Nora: What do you consider my most sacred duties?"

Helmer: Do I need to tell you that? Are they not your duties to your husband and children?

Nora: I have other duties just as sacred.

Helmer: That you have not. What duties could those be?

Nora: Duties to myself.

Helmer: Before all else, you are a wife and a mother.

Nora: That I no longer believe. I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are or at least that I should try to become one. I know that most people agree with you, Torvald, and that they say so in books. But henceforth I can't be satisfied with what most people say, and what is in books. I must think things out for myself, and try to get clear about them.

Helmer: Are you not clear about your place in your own home? Have you not an infallible guide in questions like these? Have you not religion?

Nora: Oh, Torvald, I don't really know what religion is.

Helmer: What do you mean?

Nora: I know nothing but what the clergyman said, when I was confirmed. He explained that religion was this and that. When I get away from all this and stand alone, I will look into that matter too. I will see whether what he taught me is right, or, at any rate, whether it is right for me.

Nora's critiquing of the Judeo-Christian values of her former religion smacks of the critique of God central in Nietzschean philosophy which perpetuates a suspicion against entrenched religion and morality.

Carried through the twentieth and well into the twenty-first century, the nihilistic degeneration of made things (values) comes to limelight in *Onions Make Us Cry*, symbolic in Malinda's killing of her husband. Her an-nihil-ating DJ, just like Nora's leaving her marriage, is as a result of her disillusionment and, thus, her rejection of a previous belief in subservience to a husband, this itself being "because of its own criteria – it loses its value, 'it has no moral 'weight or objective truth'" (Slocombe, 2002, p. 27). For Malinda, every act of love shown by her husband, the gifts he buys for her (the Ferragamo, Celine and Guerlain), mean nothing; they are valueless to her as a wife, except as her husband's guilt ridden gestures (Jallo, 2011, p. 28). In negation of her old beliefs and, also, as a symbol of her newly made values, Malinda argues that any man who beats his wife can be described as a good man only as long as "chickens are mammals" (p. 40).

Consequently, in the unmaking or negating of things, "there is a positing or making of another, for anything ideologically negative is a qualified negation based upon the assumption that the opposing ideology is true" (Cunningham, 2002, p. 6-7). This calls to mind Nietzsche's metaphor for the making of a new beginning or tradition, which translates nihilism to an act of philosophizing with a hammer: "the hammer, for Nietzsche, is not only a tool of destruction but an instrument of deconstruction and reconstruction – both functions are involved in the vital creation of new values. Nietzsche declares: 'He who hath to be a creator in good and

evil – verily he hath to be a destroyer, and breaks values in piece'" (Ikenna Dieke, 2010, p.80). In unmaking or opposing their traditional values, both Malinda and Nora create for themselves a new path, a different reality.

CONCLUSION

In the degeneration of values perpetuated by the two protagonists, as well as by Lola, we locate the embracing of nihilism. The two central characters both undertake in the process of groping around in the darkness of the values instilled in them by society. However, their groping in the darkness eventually culminates in the unconcealment of truth which the darkness has enshrouded from them all along. But in this perspectival unconcealment lies another phenomenon, the concealment of the values to which they have once been subject.

Thus in grappling with and eventually grasping the *alétheia* of their lives, both Lola and Malinda become individuated, and set out on the path of nothingness, which is nihilism. Yet we will not say that by their *unmaking* of traditional values the protagonists of *A Doll's House* and *Onions Make Us Cry* have attained outright authenticity. This is because authenticity is not something that one earns on one day and forever remains a holder of; it is the outcome of a long process of ontological change reversible at any point in time. As such, by their embracing of nihilism, they showcase a leap of faith (Kierkegaard) and set out on the path towards their ownmost potentiality-for-being-a-whole.

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