

"The Little Bird" and "The Old Lover": A Comparative Analysis of the Fates of Nora in "A Doll's House" and Lu Shiping in "Thunderstorm"

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Abstract. *A Doll's House* and *Thunderstorm* stand as two seminal works in the history of Chinese and Western theater, respectively portraying the deeply memorable female characters Nora and Lu Shiping while depicting the quintessential existential dilemmas faced by women in their respective societies. This paper examines the following questions: What similarities and differences exist in the awakening processes of Nora and Lu Shiping under the apparent oppression of patriarchal families? Why did one choose to "run away", while the other was compelled toward compromise and tragedy? Through close textual analysis and examination of character trajectories, this study reveals shared characteristics between the two narratives: both characters remained long dependent on male authority within their households and underwent a transformative journey from "fantasy to disillusionment"; yet, their ultimate choices diverged markedly. Upon recognizing her husband's true nature, Nora courageously stormed out, achieving spiritual liberation, whereas, despite exposing the hypocrisy of Zhou Puyuan and others amid anguish, Lu Shiping failed to break free from societal and psychological constraints, ultimately meeting a tragic end through endurance. These disparities cannot be simply attributed to individual character strengths but are deeply rooted in distinct social institutions, family ethics, and the external resources available to women in each culture. The contrast between Nora's choice of escape and Lu Shiping's compromise reflects the underlying sociocultural foundations shaping their divergent destinies.

Keywords: Nora, Lu Shiping, Women's Awakening, Comparative Analysis

1. Introduction

Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, through Nora's "runaway", opened the door to Western women's liberation and stands as a classic of 19th-century European realist drama; Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*, on the other hand, exposes the hypocritical nature of China's feudal family and patriarchal order through the tragedy of Lu Shiping, becoming a milestone in modern Chinese theater. Current academic research predominantly focuses on individual text interpretations, with systematic comparisons of the two works "developmental trajectories" remaining relatively scarce—particularly regarding the relationship between their shared status as "dependent figures" within patriarchal structures and their

divergent paths toward liberation, which warrants deeper exploration. This study examines Nora from *A Doll's House* and Lu Shiping from *Thunderstorm*, employing close textual analysis and comparative methodology. It compares the similarities in the two women's destinies across three dimensions—symbolic imagery, processes of awakening, and acts of "breakthrough"—while investigating the differences rooted in sociocultural contexts and cultural origins, thereby providing a comprehensive comparative analysis of their characters. On one hand, this research fills gaps in cross-cultural comparisons of female characters in Chinese and Western theater; on the other hand, it offers new perspectives for examining the challenges and possibilities of women's emancipation across diverse cultural backgrounds.

2. Analysis of the similarities in the fates of Nora and Lu Shiping

2.1. Core image: The symbolic paradox between "the little bird" and "the former lover"

In Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, it is stated that "women are not born but are shaped through experience [1]." In *A Doll's House*, Nora is repeatedly referred to by her husband Helmer as a "little bird". The term denotes a domesticated and confined state of existence. At home, Nora resembles a small bird kept in an elaborate cage for display; her joy and innocence depend entirely on her husband's feeding and protection, reflecting how she becomes subservient to her husband after marriage and is confined within the traditional family roles of a "virtuous wife and mother."

In *Thunderstorm*, Zhou Puyuan refers to Lu Shiping as a "former lover." This term reduces her to a tool for maintaining his moral dignity, not a genuine person. His retention of her photograph and old furniture is not affection, but an attempt to construct his image as "devoted and righteous." Both terms—"little bird" and "former lover"—confine women to roles defined by men, leaving them without agency over their own destinies.

2.1.1. The existence value is defined by males

Shirley Foucault's theory of power posits that power is omnipresent, permeating all levels and relationships within society, including the family unit. While the family is often regarded as the foundation of individual development and a haven of love, it also serves as a crucial arena for power dynamics, particularly for women [2]. Nora's worth is entirely defined by her husband Helmer's judgment. When Nora secretly borrows money to save her husband and the forged signature is discovered by Helmer, he angrily rebukes her—"You have ruined my happiness." In an instant, Nora's status declines from "angel" to "sinner," demonstrating that her value lacks any intrinsic criteria—it is entirely contingent upon Helmer's whims and interests. She may be praised for pleasing her husband, yet condemned for defying his expectations.

Lu Shiping's value, unlike Nora's, is limited by both patriarchy and feudal class. Once abandoned, she becomes nothing more than a tool for Zhou Puyuan's ego. When they meet again, he tries to pay her to leave, asking, "How much do you want before leaving this place?" This question shows how women in a male-centered world are reduced to transactions, their dignity ignored.

2.1.2. Self-sacrifice for the family constitutes a moral imperative

In *A Doll's House*, Nora is regarded as the "little bird" by her husband, and she consistently identifies herself as such within the family. Bourgeois family ethics demand that a wife be the "angel of the household"; To save her husband, she disregards legal and moral objections, forges a

signature, and bears alone the burden of repaying debts and her inner fears. Despite enduring immense psychological torment, she chooses to conceal the truth solely to preserve the family's "harmony." As a mother, she regards her children as her sole spiritual anchor, constantly restraining herself by maternal duties and relinquishing personal freedom and aspirations. Nora sees her husband and children as the driving force of her life and considers family sacrifices her true joy [3].

In *Thunderstorm*, feudal patriarchal morality demanded women remain faithful to one husband and devote everything to their family. In her youth, Lu Shiping gave herself entirely to Zhou Puyuan, only to be expelled by his family due to class differences. After being abandoned, she endured years of hardship and remarried, solely to support her children. When they met again decades later, she chose silence over seeking justice, prioritizing her children's future and the "dignity" of both families. Her sacrifice was forced by feudal ethics; she spent her entire life giving up her own dignity and dreams for her family and children.

2.2. Both undergo the awakening process of "fantasy—disillusionment"

2.2.1. From love fantasy to the Doll's awakening

Initially, Nora envisioned love as a beautiful fairy tale, believing that Helmer loved her deeply, accepted all aspects of her personality, and would protect her forever. In her fantasy, marriage was a warm harbor, and her husband was her soulmate—provided she remained obedient to Helmer, he would always cherish her. According to Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence," rulers exert control through the acquiescence of the dominated, more precisely through misinterpretation, recognition, and emotional manipulation. This flexible form of domination constitutes symbolic violence [4], which effectively explains why she once believed in genuine love despite her inability to recognize it. When she secretly borrowed money to save her husband, she believed her sacrifice would earn his gratitude and that he would protect her in a crisis. Her illusions were shattered by Helmer's reaction to her forgery. When he discovered her secret, he snapped, "You've ruined my entire life!" caring only about his own future, not her motives. In that moment, Nora realized she was never his true lover, but merely a puppet in his hands. The "love" and "happiness" of their marriage were just veils for patriarchal control, and her marriage was nothing more than a male-centered moral shackle.

Lu Shiping's view of love was fundamentally different from Nora's, shaped not by romantic fantasy but by the brutal feudal hierarchy. Her first illusion was that her love for Zhou Puyuan could transcend class barriers and win acceptance from his family. As a servant in the Zhou household, she fell in love with him and bore his children, only to be expelled to make way for his wealthy marriage. This betrayal exposed the hypocrisy behind his affection, and her sacrifice became worthless to the family's interests. Her second illusion was that her lifelong sacrifices would earn his gratitude. When they met again, she initially mistook his old habits for lingering affection. But his reaction—"What brings you here? Who sent you?"—revealed only vigilance, and his attempt to pay her off showed his "nostalgia" was just a facade. Throughout her life, she was forced to continually sacrifice herself for the family's dignity, her children's futures, and patriarchal ethics, with her personal happiness, dignity, and emotions completely disregarded. Just as Nora came to realize she was merely a puppet in her marriage, Lu Shiping finally awakened: under the feudal patriarchal system, women are inherently positioned as dependents, sacrifices, and subjects. Ultimately becoming victims of Confucian rituals and family morality [5].

3. A gender analysis of the different fates of Nora and Lu Shiping

3.1. Different approaches to breaking the deadlock

Nora's Resolute Breakthrough: Nora's act of breaking free represents a complete rupture—unhesitating and proactive resistance. With unwavering determination, she shatters the marital cage and thoroughly rejects the patriarchal society's reinforcement of female identity, ultimately achieving self-affirmation. Upon realizing she was merely her husband's "puppet," she chose not to compromise but took a series of actions: removing her dance gown, donning a coat, grabbing her handbag, and slamming the door with a thunderous "bang." Nora's departure through the door signifies her rejection of the societal roles of "virtuous wife and mother"; her refusal to accept the patriarchal definition of female identity; her resolute exit from a family that imprisoned her; her abandonment of subordinate roles as wife and mother; and her liberation from both familial and moral shackles—proclaiming herself first and foremost a "person." Through this act of departure, Nora establishes a renewed identity [6]. This resolute breakthrough truly achieves her complete self-realization.

Lu Shiping's breaking through endurance: Lu Shiping's attempt to break free was a passive breakthrough marked by enduring resistance and steadfast adherence to her principles. Her circumstances were far harsher than Nora's: confined within a feudal patriarchal society, devoid of any financial means, and burdened with the humiliating label of "the abandoned former lover," her act of liberation could not manifest as Nora's graceful departure but rather as a restrained struggle. When Zhou Puyuan attempted to settle a thirty-year-old debt with a check, she did not hesitate—she tore up the document in his presence, declaring, "The hardships I've endured over these years cannot be settled simply with money." This gesture expressed both disdain for monetary bribery and rejection of objectification. Throughout her life, Lu Shiping endured patiently yet never compromised her principles or dignity, resisting the oppression inflicted upon women of lower social strata through silent defiance. Such restrained resistance enabled her to achieve limited self-affirmation: though she failed to completely escape feudal ideologies or fulfill her maternal duties, she preserved her independent character and dignity amidst adversity, achieving spiritual awakening in her own way.

3.2. Fate trajectory: Different paths from dependent to awakened states

Both Nora in *A Doll's House* and Lu Shiping in *Thunderstorm* endured oppression under a patriarchal society, yet their fates diverged fundamentally. The following analysis examines their differences in terms of consciousness awakening, modes of resistance, and the significance of their endings.

The Awakening of Consciousness: Nora's awakening is conscious and rational, transforming her from a "puppet" into a true "person." Realizing Helmer's selfish nature, she declares: "First and foremost, I am a person—just like you; at least I must learn to be one. From now on, I cannot blindly trust what the majority says or what books teach. I must think for myself and understand the underlying truths of every matter." In this moment, she gains self-awareness, recognizing the value of her own spirit and independence. In contrast, Lu Shiping remains trapped in ignorance. Though she protests, "The suffering I've endured over the years cannot be compensated with money," she attributes her pain to "fate" rather than the feudal society and class oppression that caused it. This lack of awareness keeps her in a cycle of resignation and endurance.

Method of Resistance and Its Significance: Nora's resistance constitutes an active "spiritual departure." The moment she slams the door marks her complete rejection of predetermined roles—the "wife to her husband" and "mother to her children"—as she believes she cannot raise children until she has truly become a person. This act of resistance is distinctly individual in character, pointing toward the possibility of rebirth. In his essay "What Happened After Nora Left," Lu Xun proposed four perspectives [7]; however, what matters most about Nora's "departure" is not where she goes, but the act of leaving itself. This departure marks the beginning of Nora's self-awakening and the start of a life truly her own. Although her father and husband once treated her like a puppet, her strong inner resolve and unwavering spirit enabled her to break free from the constraints of the "puppet household" and live a life of her own—though not affluent, she enjoyed boundless freedom [8].

Lu Shiping's resistance was passive and cyclical in nature: driven out of the Zhou family in her youth, she returned thirty years later to the Zhou residence with her daughter Lu Sifeng. Her entire life was marked by evasion—she hoped to escape the shadows of her past through this means yet gradually found herself consumed by deeper shadows. Her resistance was defensive: she fled to distant lands, assumed an anonymous identity, and ordered her daughter never to work again at the Zhou residence. She sought to sever all ties with specific places and people but failed to break free from the mental shackles and the oppression of feudal ethics. Her ultimate fate was a mental breakdown upon witnessing her children's tragic deaths; her madness represented utter destruction.

4. The underlying causes behind differences in fate

4.1. Differences in cultural genes: "Individual-centered" vs "relationship-centered"

Nora was immersed in the Nordic Protestant cultural sphere, where individual consciousness flourished after the Enlightenment, and the pursuit of an independent personality became the highest value. Her words upon leaving home—"I am first and foremost a person"—embodied this cultural ethos; Nora believed that even in the face of uncertain prospects, reclaiming one's "self" was paramount.

Lu Shiping was embedded within the "relationship-oriented" framework of China's ethics—requiring women to adhere to three obediences and four virtues. This constituted the Confucian code of conduct specifically for women. The "Three Obediences" referred to obeying one's father at home, one's husband outside, and one's son after the husband's death. The "Four Virtues" encompassed a woman's speech, conduct, appearance, and accomplishments—meaning her words, actions, and grooming should all be subordinate to and pleasing to her husband; at home, she was expected to raise children well and attend to her husband and in-laws [9].

Next are the pivotal nodes of ethical relationships: daughter, wife, and mother. Her entire worth is defined within the web of human relationships. Thus, her suffering extends beyond material suffering to encompass spiritual oppression. She lacks a discourse to uphold "individual independence," forcing her ultimately to return to the most fundamental yet helpless framework of explanation: "fate."

4.2. Differences in social environment

19th-century Norway: Capitalism was on the rise during this period, while the feminist movement gained momentum. The publication of *A Doll's House* in 1879 coincided with the peak of domestic discussions on women's liberation in Norway. The renowned novelist Camilla Collett had published

The Daughters of the Employees between 1854 and 1855, which significantly contributed to advancing women's emancipation at the time. After that, she went to various places to deliver speeches advocating the importance of women's liberation [10].

Norway also introduced legal reforms, including debates over married women's property and education rights, creating space for Nora's choice to leave. In contrast, early 20th-century China was a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society where feudal ethics and patriarchy remained strong. Women were expected to obey men and follow the "three obediences and four virtues," leaving those in lower classes without property rights or independence. Under both class and gender oppression, they had few options but to accept their fate or face ruin.

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the typical female characters Nora and Lu Shiping in the two dramatic works, it becomes clear that although they inhabit different countries and eras, both are trapped within patriarchal family structures. Nora is a refined and pampered "little bird"; Lu Shiping, however, faces an even more tragic fate: not only was she heartlessly abandoned by Zhou Puyuan, but thirty years later she must confront her past wounds again as a "servant," forever branded with the male-defined identity of her "ex-lover" and unable to break free. Together, these characters reveal that within the patriarchal discourse system, women never attain the subjectivity of being human; their value is entirely dependent on the roles assigned by men—wife, mother, lover—and never on themselves.

Both Nora and Lu Shiping had once devoted themselves entirely to that illusion, which brought them warmth. To save her husband's life, Nora secretly borrowed money and worked tirelessly to repay the debt, even forging a signature, believing her husband would be grateful and protect her; Lu Shiping, in her youth, had genuinely loved Zhou Puyuan and given birth to two children for him, trusting he would keep his promise. Yet the outcome was different: Nora received the words, "You slut! Look at what you have done!" Lu Shiping, on the other hand, was expelled from the Zhou family and found herself alone, holding her seriously ill child with no way out. Both endured the psychological anguish of transitioning from "fantasy" to "disillusionment"—this marked the beginning of their awakening.

However, their similar life dilemmas led to vastly different outcomes: Nora, living in the Enlightenment-influenced Nordic society during the rise of capitalism, found a glimmer of economic independence that allowed her to declare the possibility of rebirth with a resolution; Lu Shiping found herself trapped between feudal moral codes and rigid class barriers, unable to break free, and ultimately could only condemn the old society through her limited act of tearing up a check and her spiritual destruction. This contrast clearly reveals that the potential and limitations of women's liberation never stem solely from individual courage, but rather from the interplay between social conditions and differences in self-perception. This cross-cultural literary dialogue continues to offer profound insights for contemporary reflections on the construction of female agency.

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