Reimagining the New Woman: Tanika Gupta's adaptation of *A Doll's House* (2019) on the London stage

by *Giovanna Buonanno**

Abstract

The reception of Ibsen's plays in England has been amply documented by scholars who have focused especially on how his work resonated with feminist writers and intellectuals championing the New Woman in late Victorian Britain. It was especially the character of Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House* that galvanized the activity of translators and actresses, who teased out the complexity of this character and its significance in the cultural context of fin de siècle Britain. In later epochs, the play has frequently been revived through rewritings that have gradually aligned Nora's predicament and her quest for self-realization with the changing roles of women in society.

In the 2019 rewriting of *A Doll's House* by playwright Tanika Gupta, the play is relocated to Calcutta in 1879, the year *A Doll's House* was written and two years after Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India. Nora/Niru is a Bengali middle-class woman married to an English manager, Tom Helmer. The adaptation strengthens therefore the transnational appeal of the play that early women translators into English had intended to unpack, while simultaneously providing insights into Anglo-Indian relations in imperial Britain.

This article intends to focus on the strategies adopted by Gupta in her postcolonial relocation of Ibsen's work. Gupta's intersectional take on the woman question brings to the fore interconnected issues of race, class and gender, thus contributing to the construction of the new woman in diasporic South Asian women's writing (Hussain 2005).

Keywords: Tanika Gupta, *A Doll's House*, Rewriting, Anglo-Indian relations, New Woman.

1
Introduction: Ibsen, the New Woman and fin de siècle England

The history of Ibsen as a harbinger of change whose "impact on Victorian cultural modernity in the 1880s and 1890s was immense" (Ledger, 2002, p. 79), has been amply documented by scholars who have retraced the (often controversial) reception of his work in fin de siècle England. In the cross-over process of Ibsen's *oeuvre* into English culture, a crucial role was played by feminist intellectuals and translators, as well as by actresses who advanced women's rights and championed the New Woman (Newey, 2005). It was the character of Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House* (1879) that particularly

* Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia.

ISSN 1974-2886

galvanized the activity of female translators and actresses who variously engaged with Ibsen's play by providing translations, rehearsed readings and theatre productions, aiming to tease out the complexity of this character and its significance in the late Victorian cultural context that had favoured the emergence of the New Woman.

Despite Ibsen's subsequent claim that it was never his intention as a writer to contribute to the women's rights' movement, *A Doll's House* came to reveal how theatre could be a powerful platform for raising awareness on the woman question on the eve of the new century[1]. As Gail Finney has argued, "[i]n closing the door on her husband and children, Nora opened the way to turn-of-the-century women's movement" (1994, p. 91). Hence, the play found fertile soil when it was transplanted in England at a time when the New Woman, as both a new social subject and a new cultural construct, was at the centre of a heated public debate[2]. *A Doll's House* resonated with the spirit of the time and pointed towards fundamental changes affecting the role of women, in that it questioned the received notion that women's ethical priorities should be seen entirely within the small structure of the home, whereas men's imperatives pertained more the public domain. Admittedly, Nora Helmer has features of the New Woman because she matures as a character from a position of marital subordination towards independence, challenging patriarchal control over women and exposing the institution of marriage as a prison-house. However, as the unreconciled ending of the play suggests, she also displays some of the most controversial connotations of the modern woman as an "unwomanly woman," a modern-day virago, capable of relinquishing her duty as a mother of young children and abandoning them in her pursuit of individual freedom.

In spite of the complex and controversial aspects of this character, in the early phase of Ibsen's reception in England both English and international actresses performed this role on the London stage and contributed to the international circulation of the play, as well as to strengthening Ibsen's fame as the father of modern drama. As a pivotal point in Ibsen's new drama that, in the words of actress Elizabeth Robins, provided actresses with "glorious actable stuff" (1928, p. 31), the play was the object of fierce debate and underwent multiple transformations in its early circulation in Europe. As is well known, Ibsen himself provided an alternative happy ending to satisfy Hedwig Niemann-Raabe who made her debut as Nora in Berlin in 1880, because the leading German actress had refused to perform the original ending, on the grounds that she would never leave her children (Räthel, 2020). A sanitized, melodramatic version entitled *Breaking a butterfly*, also featuring a happy ending, was staged in London in 1884, while a rehearsed reading based on Henrietta Frances Lord's translation took place in 1886 at the Bloomsbury home of Eleanor Marx Aveling. Eleanor Marx was a passionate supporter of Ibsen and translator of his work; in her reading performance of *A Doll's House*, she chose the role of Nora for herself, while her husband Max Aveling played Torvald Helmer and George Bernard Shaw the scheming Krogstadt who blackmails Nora.

On the London stage, the role of Nora Helmer was closely associated with the English actress Janet Achurch, who appeared in the first fully-fledged production

of the play at the Novelty Theatre in London in 1889, whereas as an internationally acclaimed actress, Eleonora Duse was also responsible for popularizing the play, as well as for offering a different, nuanced interpretation of Nora. When she made her London debut in this role in 1893, Duse chose to appear in a dark, plain dress carrying a latchkey, a symbol of independence that seemed to evoke the imagery of the New Woman, which was also suggested by her approach to the character as a strong-minded woman as opposed to the "empty-headed doll"[3].

The flurry of theatrical activity that in the last decade of the nineteenth century was largely sustained by the work of women, showed, on the one hand, the extent to which the play reflected the turn of the century society's investment in and anxiety around the New Woman, on the other that *A Doll's House* was not bound to the Scandinavian context that had produced it and could be grafted onto cultures that were remote from Ibsen's Norway, as the English success of Duse, "a southern woman [...] of a different temperament than Ibsen's Nora" seemed to prove[4]. The early history of this role in England ultimately released its potential to cross borders, as would become apparent in its subsequent circulation in theatres around the world.

1.1. Rewriting *A Doll's House* for the twenty-first century English and global stage

Following the huge impact of Ibsen on modernist theatre and culture between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, a renewed interest in his work emerged in the 1970s, a period of resurgence of feminism and women's movements in Europe and beyond. As Erika Fischer-Lichte has noted, Ibsen's plays not only spoke to a process of modernization but also played a "major part in advancing it" (2012, p. 3). The contemporary sociocultural context shaped by globalization and the rise of marginalized social groups has favoured the circulation of Ibsen's plays, and numerous productions of *A Doll's House* across the globe have repositioned Nora in multiple cultural contexts (Fischer-Lichte, 2012). In the twenty-first century Nora continues to function as a vehicle with which explore women's issues in different cultural contexts, and the play is still conducive to the analysis of unequal gender and power relations. In the words of Toril Moi, "Nora's struggle for recognition as a human being was and still is considered an exemplary case of women's struggle for political and social rights" (2008, 226).

On the contemporary London stage, the play has frequently been revived through rewritings that have gradually aligned Nora's predicament and her quest for self-realization with the changing roles of women in society. In Zinnie Harris's 2009 version with Gillian Anderson in the lead role, Nora's drama unfolds against the backdrop of the political unrest of Edwardian England, symbolising "the continuing nature of female oppression"(Billington, 2009), whereas in the 2012 adaptation by Simon Stephen and directed by Carrie Cracknell, Nora is reimagined as modern-day London woman who struggles to "amalgamate a series of roles and identities" and ultimately

exposes how hard it still is today for women to juggle work and family and "get this multiple role-playing right" (Cracknell, 2012).

A recent rewriting by playwright Tanika Gupta offers a postcolonial take on Ibsen's work and a fresh perspective on Nora as a New Woman, interpreted through the lens of British-Asian culture. Gupta's *A Doll's House* premiered at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre in London in September 2019 and was directed by the Hammersmith's artistic director Rachel O'Riordan. This work will be discussed in this essay as a significant addition to the many afterlives of Ibsen's play, as well as a transcultural appropriation that also reflects the play's undisputed centrality in English theatre. In her investigation of the role of women in a patriarchal society shaped by colonial history, Gupta brings to the fore the transnational potential of the play that early women translators of Ibsen's work into English like Henrietta Frances Lord, feminist intellectuals like Eleanor Marx and actresses like Achurch and Duse had unpacked, when they emphasized the significance of this character in the socio-cultural context of the Nineties.

2
Tanika Gupta's *A Doll's House* (2019): exploring Anglo-Indian relations in the British Raj through the lens of gender, class and race

Tanika Gupta is a leading dramatist who has worked for the theatre and across the media since the early 1990s and has been instrumental in the crossover of British Asian culture into mainstream culture. Along with original works, she has produced a sizeable body of rewritings as part of her project of "staging the intercultural" (Gupta and Sierz, 2010, p. 38). As a British writer of Bengali origin, "inflected by her heritage, but not bound by it" (Sierz, 2012, p. 15), Gupta has often relocated her rewritings in India, and has endeavoured to establish connections with diverse aspects of South Asian history and culture, while simultaneously opening a dialogue with classic, canonical works in the European literary and dramatic canon[5].

In these works, Gupta examines the relationship between England and India throughout the Victorian and Edwardian age, by dramatizing ordinary lives against the backdrop of eventful historical moments, thus weaving together personal and political narratives. In her version of *Great Expectations* that premiered in London in 2011, as part of the global celebrations of Dickens's 200th birth anniversary, the playwright, in a similar vein to her retelling of *A Doll's House*, does not significantly alter the source text and retains the novel's nineteenth-century setting, while moving the story to India. Pip, the orphan at the centre of Dickens's rags-to- riches novel, is an Indian boy surrounded by a microcosm of characters whose stories are rooted in different parts of the world, but are closely intertwined and shaped by the intense trade and mobility in the territories administered by the British throughout the century.

Gupta's original work has also been frequently inspired by the complex, interrelated history of Britain and India, in an attempt to shed light "on the effects of colonization on a nation and its people" (Jones, 2019, p. 11)[6] and offer a view of politics of the

Empire. As Marlena Tronicke suggests, the underlying assumption "of her multiple critical forays into the history and politics of British imperialism", is that many histories still remain untold (Tronicke, 2019, p. 61).

Gupta's *A Doll's House* is relocated to Calcutta in 1879, the year Ibsen wrote the play and two years after Queen Victoria was pronounced Empress of India by Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. This event marked a new phase in the history of British rule over India and was intended to strengthen the Crown's control over the Indian population, which placed further strain on the relationship between the British and the Indians. In the first act of the play, a brief reference to the proclamation slips into a conversation between the two white English characters Tom Helmer and Dr Rank, and highlights Gupta's critique of imperial Britain: if Helmer believes that, thanks to this new phase, "order has been restored", Dr. Rank bluntly dismisses it as an attempt on the part of Disraeli "to keep the old woman happy, and himself in a job" (Gupta, 2019, p. 34).

In the preface to the published edition of the play Gupta lays out the key questions that underpin her revision of Ibsen's work. She admits to being fascinated by Ibsen's "powerful portrait of how a young woman – Nora – breaks free from the shackles of a patriarchal marriage" (2019, p. 10) and the ways in which, when transposed to the time of British rule in India, the play could effectively explore "additional power dynamics" (Gupta, 2019, p. 10). In Gupta's *A Doll's House*, Nora/Niru is a Bengali middle-class woman married to an English administrator Torvald/ Tom Helmer who has just been promoted to the role of Chief of Tax collection. Casting Nora as an Indian woman provides insights into Anglo-Indian relations and intermarriages under the Raj and works both at the domestic and political level, as it discloses the problematic position of Indian women, especially those who were married to British men. Marriage or cohabitation with Indian women had been fairly common during the period in which the East India Company ruled India, and as Gupta states in the preface to the play, these unions are the origin of Calcutta's "substantial Anglo-Indian (or Eurasian) community today" (Gupta, 2019, p. 11). However, in 1858 the East India Company had its licence withdrawn, the British Raj was established and India passed under the rule of the Crown[7]. The custom of intermarriage quickly declined under the Raj and was eventually actively discouraged. Therefore, Tom Helmer's choice to marry Niru could initially be seen as a challenge to both the new policy enforced by the Crown, as well as an act of defiance towards his prejudiced countrymen who see his wife as "subhuman" and had even encouraged him to "keep the woman as a concubine" (Gupta, 2019, p. 35), even though his attitude to her, as will be pointed out later, is still flawed and influenced by the prejudiced views of the British.

The play offers a persuasive examination of the Helmer's cross-cultural household that marks the boundaries of Niru's confinement: in the three-act play the action moves easily between the interior and outdoor spaces of a large colonial house featuring various rooms, including a living room, a terrace/verandah, a bedroom, a courtyard and the servant's quarters (Gupta, 2019, p. 13). In the Lyric Hammersmith

production, the setting consisted of a tiered courtyard house framed by terracotta walls and a banana tree growing high in the middle: this sophisticated setting conflates elements of both Indian and English architecture, so as to reflect the hybrid nature of the Helmer's wealthy household, while also resembling Victorian prison-houses, suggestive of Niru's imprisonment predicated upon the Victorian norms of the separate spheres[8]. Niru's marriage to a high-ranking British man has also involved uprooting and transformations, including her conversion from Hinduism to the Christian faith (Gupta, 2019, p. 73) and her transfer from her home town of Darjeeling, a hill summer station in West Bengal, to Calcutta, the capital city and centre of the administrative power. The tension between Calcutta and Darjeeling is played out so as to contrast urban modernity with rural tradition, as well as to illustrate Niru's competing ideas of "home": Darjeeling is the place she had chosen to move to temporarily with Tom in the early phase of their marriage, in order to nurse him when he had been very ill and needed the fresh air of the hills (Gupta, 2019, p. 29); it is also where she heads off to at the end of the play, both in her pursuit of an independent life, and in an attempt to reconnect with her past (Gupta, 2019, p. 112) – a departure from the original Ibsen's script, where Nora's destination is unknown.

In the illuminating opening scene set on Christmas Eve, Niru returns from her Christmas shopping wearing an expensive sari "draped over, to cover her head in public [...] bangles on her wrists and anklets on her feet" (Gupta, 2019, p. 15). Tom is amused by his "Indian skylark chirruping away" (Gupta, 2019, p. 16) and reprimands her both for her sweet tooth and for being a spendthrift, but ultimately admits in condescending tones, he wouldn't want her "to be any other way" (Gupta, 2019, p. 20):

TOM: Niru, you are a very pretty but expensive pet!
[...]
TOM: Has my little sweet-toothed fairy been up to no good in the city today?
NIRU: No Tom.
TOM: A little tasting, nibbling and munching of *jelebis* perhaps? (Gupta, 2019, pp. 20-1).

The cheerful tones, however, betray both Niru's girlish, coquettish nature and the fragility of her position as Tom's wife and dependent on which the drama hinges. By delving further into their relationship, the play provides insights into how the Raj operated not only in the context of intermarriages and within the domestic realm, but in society at large. To this end, Gupta adds a new scene in the first act of the play between Tom and Dr Rank, the terminally ill surgeon who, in Ibsen's source text performs the role of Torvald's close and loyal friend, who is secretly in love with Niru. In Gupta's work, Rank is assigned the role of anti-imperialist and a foil to Tom. Scene three in the first act, set in Tom's study, offers little snapshots of Indian life under the British which contribute to place the Helmer's domestic drama within the turmoil of Victorian India's "dynamic time" (Gupta, 2019, p. 11). Rank describes how "the Indians are dying to their thousands", due to British rule which exacerbates famines, and he

argues that the railways and infrastructure have been built to transport troops and curb anti-British rebellions, as well as "to transport food out of productive regions for export" (Gupta, 2019, p. 34). Tom Helmer is equally resentful of the excesses of British rule when he unveils harrowing details of how the British mistreat or even abuse their servants and can easily get away with their crimes:

TOM: Captain Elliot – an unspeakable brute. Kicked his Indian servant to death. Doctors examined the servant's spleen and claimed it was enlarged due to malaria and that is why the poor man died. Accidental death was how it was recorded. [...]
DR RANK: I remember. The death of an Indian at British hands is always an 'accident' (Gupta, 2019, p. 35).

However, Tom still believes in his country's mission to "spread culture and knowledge" and make "England great", whereas Rank retorts that as oppressors they had lost their "humanity along the way" (Gupta, 2019, pp. 35-6).

Rank's critique of Empire from the perspective of a white British man, who is even accused by Tom of having "gone completely native" (Gupta, 2019, p. 36), is resumed later and spelled out more forcefully by Das, one of Tom Helmer's low caste, Indian employees and a moneylender, who, like the original Krogstad in the source text, comes to the Helmer's home to blackmail Niru. He vents his rage as a subaltern and casts a shadow of the anti-British rebellion that was brewing in the country, resenting "the white man who plunders our country" (Gupta, 2019, p. 52). In a tense exchange with Niru, Das further accuses the British of having "moved across this land like locusts and enslaved us, relegated us to menial positions" while also blaming Indians like her "who look down on the rest of us" (Gupta, 2019, pp. 54-5). Das reinforces this point in a later scene, when he calls Niru a "little exotic pet [...] Spoilt and pampered all her life. Simpering lackey to the English" (Gupta, 2019, p. 82), which clarifies the extent to which she occupies an uneasy in-between position under the colonial regime, being both exoticized by the British and despised by her fellow Indians for crossing the lines between oppressors and oppressed.

Tom Helmer's role as a lawyer and an administrator, liaising between family and community, the Indians and the British, is of significance especially because of the connection Gupta intends to suggest between home and nation. In his stance towards Das, whom he despises for "his lack of morality" and for being "morally unfit" (Gupta, 2019, p. 58) and that in turn, resounds with the ways he looks down on his wife, prefigures his disdain of her when later in the play he aligns Niru with the supposedly lower moral standards of her people. Tom's patriarchal mindset and role as gatekeeper of the Empire, brings the synecdoche of home and nation into focus, also in his passing mention of the *memsahibs*, the English colonial wives. He openly criticizes their habit of making "their homes as if they were in England [...] India's full of faint hearted, simpering memsahibs [...] always complaining about the heat" (Gupta, 2019, p. 22).

One additional key to understanding Tom's western view of Niru is offered by the way he exoticizes her. This becomes clear when Niru rehearses a dance at a high dramatic point in the second act when she fears Das will expose her secret. In Ibsen's text, the scene is one of the most controversial parts of the play, loaded with sexual overtones, in which Nora makes a spectacle of her body to please and entertain her husband by dancing a tarantella. The male characters, Tom and Dr. Rank see her as a beautiful woman dancing for their amusement, while the other woman present, Mrs Linde, sees the anguish in Nora's wild dance, or, as Moi argues, while "the former theatricalize her, the latter sees her as a soul in pain" (2006, p. 271). Rooted in the culture of Southern Italy, the solo tarantella, as opposed to the courtly tarantella dance, is a form of hysterical catharsis during which women can escape temporarily from their prescribed roles as mothers and wives (Finney, 1994, p. 98). Gupta preserves the dance scene and transforms it into a moment of Indian classic dance, with Niru metamorphosed into a Mughal princess in the eyes of Tom and Dr. Rank. Her choice of replacing the tarantella with khatak, an Indian classic dance, works at multiple levels: as a ritualistic dance with a fast pace and drumbeat, it enhances the dramatic effect of the scene with Niru dancing and spinning "wildly, out of control" (Gupta, 2019, p. 89); it is also a tribute to Gupta's Bengali background, as well as to contemporary forms of diasporic South Asian performance culture, since this type of dance often features in Bollywood films, where it is used as a sensual, courting dance[9]. Gupta places the dance scene more firmly within the context of Anglo-Indian relations by adding the detail that Niru will perform at a fancy-dress party hosted by the MacDonalds, one of the few British couples to have befriended the Helmers, and that it is Tom who suggests that she go as "a Mughal dancing girl" (Gupta, 2019, p. 62). One could argue that Niru is welcome there precisely because of her exotic appeal, as a titillating object of amusement and curiosity. This minor detail complicates the meaning of woman as spectacle for men's consumption at the heart of Ibsen's tarantella, and turns the dancing Niru into an object of the Orientalist gaze of the colonial English.

The dance also marks a turning point in the play and builds up a crescendo, culminating in the revelation of Niru's secret that propels the action towards the final conflict between husband and wife. When in scene two of act three Tom discovers his wife's guilt in forging her father's signature, in order to secure the loan that had financed his treatment and recovery in Darjeeling, he shows his rage and speaks "as an angry husband and a spokesperson for blinkered colonialism" (Neill, 2019).

TOM: I should have known that something like this would happen. I went against society, against nature to take you into my home.
NIRU: Against nature.
TOM Don't say a word. Be quiet. You have the same blood as your father. His irresponsible, fraudulent ways. I should have known better than to overlook his criminal activities. For you, I did it for you. And yet you're the same. No religion, no morals. I thought by converting you to Christianity, you would change (Gupta, 2019, pp. 105-6).

Tom's racial bias against Niru's family and her whole race, channels the play towards its end and layers it with more complex and political overtones, that reinforce Niru's double oppression, because of her gender and her race. The final scene of the play testifies to Niru's awakening in both personal and political terms, and precipitates her decision to leave. She turns Tom's reasoning based on her acting "against nature" on its head, and her eloquent defence reads as a reminder of the equally unnatural imposition of English rule on India:

NIRU: Yes. You said that you had gone against your nature by marrying me. Perhaps I went against my nature too. Or against nature itself. This is not your land. It is not your home. You live here as strangers (Gupta, 2019, p. 113).

In her last appearance on the stage, Niru has removed the lush, embroidered attire of the khatak, adorned with bangles and music anklets, and replaced it with a humble cotton sari that visually renders her more profound inner transformation. When Niru leaves, there is no final shutting of doors but the ornate portal of her marital home remains ajar, thus creating a sense of her lingering between past and present, in keeping with the unresolved ending of Ibsen's play. She walks out of her past life as a kittenish, married woman trapped in a colonial doll's house, while the political slant of her final confrontation with Tom reinforces the metonymic use of home for Indians under the Raj, who are displaced in their own home by the imposition of the Raj rule. Her unadorned appearance symbolizes both her removal of the shackles of patriarchal rule, and heralds India's eventual removal of the shackles of imperial rule[10]. Niru's dramaturgical trajectory also comes full circle: she had made her entrance in the play at daytime, well dressed, bejewelled and with her head covered, while the outdoor sounds of Calcutta, "temple bells and conch shells, prayer chants, children's voices" (Gupta, 2019, p. 15) eased her into the comfort of her home; now, as the final stage direction details:

NIRU: emerges out on to the night streets of Calcutta. We hear the sounds of carts and people talking. She listens to the vibrant sounds of life around her and looks timid at first. Slowly she removes the veil from her head and stands unafraid (Gupta, 2019, pp. 116-7).

3
The New Woman's quest for 'home' in the Anglo-Indian context

Niru's relationship with other female characters in the play further illuminates the position of Indian women in the Raj. Their role in Ibsen's text is mainly intended to offset the emotional hardship endured by Nora Helmer in a comfortable middle-class home, with the material difficulty experienced by less privileged women, burdened by poverty and the rigidity of the class or caste system. When transposed to an Anglo-Indian context, minor characters such as Mrs. Lahiri and the *ayah* Uma bring to light

the neglected lives of working women who like Uma, are employed in rich households, looking after the family's children while leaving behind their own who grow up as virtually estranged (Gupta, 2019, p.61). Krishna Lahiri, in turn, contrary to the society's norms of modesty and propriety, is forced to provide for her own upkeep by taking up menial jobs. Interestingly, in constructing her character Gupta makes few changes and keeps close to Ibsen's script; Krishna Lahiri appears on the scene as a long-lost childhood friend (Christine Linde in Ibsen's text) who returns as an impoverished, hungry woman "furtively eati[ing] all the food on her plate" (Gupta, 2019, p. 37), wearing a plain, white sari that marks her status as a widow. She hopes that Niru can use her influence to help her get a job as a clerk in Tom's office and to this end she spins a tale of loss and displacement:

LAHIRI: I had to turn my hand to anything I could. You know how difficult it is as a woman to work here. But I did get some temporary work here and there - managing a small supplies shop, teaching in a girl's boarding school. The last three years have felt like nonstop work without any rest. [...] Everyone looks down on me because I am a working woman. People gossip – some say I am shameless walking about, my face uncovered. That's why I came here. Calcutta is more modern (Gupta, 2019, pp. 30-1).

An exploration of the multiple female perspectives of the play shows how Gupta's work taps into an expanding canon of contemporary South Asian diasporic women's writing, elaborating on major themes such as home and belonging. As Ruth Maxey argues,

South Asian writers [...] examine home in order to raise provocative questions about changing societies and the place of ethnic South Asians within them. Home thus serves as an important synecdoche for wider social and national concerns (2011, p. 28).

Gupta's compelling investigation of the various connotations of home for a transcultural character like Niru is then enriched by the other female characters' contrasting experiences of home, in the fraught context of inter-ethnic relations during the Empire. As an impoverished widow, Mrs. Lahiri both symbolizes the fate of women who cannot rely on the ease and stability provided by their husbands, and unwittingly points the way out of the doll's house for Niru, when she encourages her to look beyond the boundaries of her home, as other 'new women' in Calcutta are doing:

MRS: LAHIRI There are other women out there like me. Working women. Only next door to you a widow – Mrs Lal - has her own private photography studio.
NIRU: Taking photographs?
MRS LAHIRI: Exclusively of ladies. The business is making a lot of profit. [...] There's a lot going on out there. The world is changing Niru (Gupta, 2019, p. 31).

In the exchanges between Niru and Lahiri, an alternative, more composite view of their life emerges, despite the material and social differences between them. This also helps

to counterbalance Tom's view of Niru as an "expensive pet", suggested in the opening scene of the play, and makes Niru's character more rounded and her transition from subjugation towards independence more credible:

NIRU: [...] Whenever Tom gave me cash for saris or material for dresses, I always kept a half of the money back. Bought the cheapest things and Tom never noticed. At times, it was very hard on me because it is nice to have good silk saris isn't it Krishna? Benarasis7, Temple, Dhaka silk, Toshor...
MRS LAHIRI: I imagine it is. I only have cotton ones (Gupta, 2019, p. 39).

4
Conclusion

By revisiting the character of Nora Helmer and placing her at the heart of a Victorian, colonial household, Gupta offers a critical perspective on the British Raj and illuminates the condition of Indian women in it, one that was determined by their gender and ethnicity, as well as by intersecting factors, such as class and financial means. Gupta charts Niru's evolution from "Indian skylark" (Gupta, 2019, p. 20), and "timid Indian princess" (Gupta, 2019, p. 100), devoted to making "the house pretty and have things nice for Tom just as he likes it" (Gupta, 2019, p. 40), to a woman who finally comes to realize she has been playing the subaltern colonial wife in her British husband's doll-house. She also acknowledges that prior to her marriage, she had been raised as her father's "*putul*, his doll" (Gupta, 2019, p. 110), and has now decided to forge an independent life for herself:

NIRU: I passed out of my Baba's charge into yours. You arranged everything according to your tastes and so I got the same tastes as you – or at least I pretended to. When I look back on it I feel like a clown, existing only for your entertainment. [...] I am your doll-wife just as I was my Baba's doll-child before (Gupta, 2019, pp. 110-1).

The author places Niru's story within an evolving Anglo-Indian context illustrating the instability and unequal power relations of the British Raj, while dramatizing the character's attempts to understand and articulate her own desires and needs. In this respect, as a South Asian diasporic woman writer, Gupta constructs an "intimate epic" that "locate[s] and fuse[s] family drama within wider political upheavals" (Ranasinha, 2016, p. 9). Gupta's approach to Ibsen's work also resounds with Patricia Hill Collins's view that "intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (2000, p. 18). Her intersectional take on the New Woman question engages with overlapping forms of oppression that bring to light the contemporaneous historicity of the play. Niru's dramaturgical arc is both personal and political and a vivid illustration of how "race, gender, class, and sexuality interact in complex ways that shape subjects and

institutions alike" (Nash, 2011, p. 446). Gupta persuasively delves into the imbalance of power endorsed by the Empire, so as to illustrate how Niru and the other female characters in *A Doll's House* grapple with the difficulty of locating home in the face of uprooting and financial precarity. Her dramatization of female stories resonates with the identity politics of diasporic South Asian women's writers, whose work reflects their ongoing search for "alternative homes or makeshift shelters [...] enabling invisible imaginative spaces and histories to emerge" (Nasta, 2000, p. 84). Simultaneously, frequent references to political instability in the Raj voiced by Dr. Rank, along with the budding anticolonial struggle represented by Das, are informed by contemporary critical inquiry into imperialism and race relations.

The play ultimately invites us to consider how the long nineteenth century shaped by imperialism and mounting resistance to it has impacted on the contemporary, as both the constraints Niru is subject to and the challenge she poses to the patriarchal and colonial world are still debated today and continue to impinge on the life of postcolonial people. Gupta's historically-informed exploration of the New Woman in an Anglo-Indian context moves beyond "being simply an 'all Asian' *Doll's House*", and becomes a compelling examination of different forms of oppression, thus making Niru's liberation at the end of the play "more layered and more poignant." (Gupta, 2019, p. 11). As a postcolonial revision of a classic text about female subjugation, her retelling of *A Doll's House* opens "fissures in the supposedly solid foundations" of the source text (Thieme, 2001, p. 2), while contributing to the literary construction of the New Woman in diasporic South Asian women's writing (Hussain, 2005). Ultimately the writer has offered an innovative, cross-cultural perspective on the play, unleashing once again the potential of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* to explore the woman question across time.

Notes

1. In his address to the Norwegian Association for Women's Rights in 1898, some twenty years after the publication and first staging of *A Doll's House*, Ibsen famously remarked that whatever he had written, had been "without any conscious thought of making propaganda" and that his task had been "the description of humanity" (Ibsen, 1972, p. 65).

2. Arguably, the term New Woman first appeared in Sarah Grand's essay 'The new aspect of the woman question' published in 1894 and soon came to identify the new breed of free-spirited, independent and educated women who questioned the traditional role of homemakers assigned to them. The New Woman became a force for change throughout the late-Victorian and Edwardian epochs, even though a significant revision of the role of women in society was already well under way by the time the term was coined. Undoubtedly, it had been accelerated by key reforms in important areas, such as the divorce law reform in 1857, and the Married Women's Property Act in 1882 that gave property rights to married women (Ledger, 1997).

3. William Archer, *World of 1893*, qtd. in Buonanno (2002, p. 190).

4. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 June 1893, qtd. in Buonanno (2002, p. 193).

5. Gupta's adaptations of European classics range from William Wycherley's Restoration comedy *The Country Wife* at the Watford Palace Theatre in 2004 to a translation of Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* for the National Theatre in 2001 and, more recently, *A Midsummer Nights' Dream* reinterpreted through the lens of Bollywood aesthetics, presented at the Shakespeare's Globe in 2016.

6. See in particular *Lions and Tigers* (2017), a play about Bengali revolutionaries set in the years 1927-1931 that preceded the independence of India, and *The Empress* (2013), where she blends the true story of the

relationship between an ageing Queen Victoria and her Indian protegee Abdul Karim with the fictional story of an Indian *ayah* (nanny) in Britain at the turn of the century.

7. On interracial relations and intermarriages in India in the eighteenth and nineteenth century see Darlymple (2002).

8. Detailed information on the Lyric Hammersmith production is available at https://lyric.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/A-Dolls-House_Education-Pack_Lyric-2019.pdf (Accessed 2021-11-20).

9. Gupta discusses the role of the khatak dance in her version of *A Doll's House*, during her conversation with RADA student Adrian David Paul at https: //www.youtube.com/watch?v=9h_rftZVB0U (Accessed 2021-12-10).

10. When asked about the ending of the play and Niru's prospects outside the doll-house, Gupta claims that the character's future is "nationalism", thus remarking the political strand of her rewriting and the home-nation metonymy: https: //www.youtube.com/watch?v=9h_rftZVB0U (Accessed 2021-12-10).

References

Billington M. (2009), *A Doll's House*, in "The Guardian", 20 May, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/may/20/a-dolls-house-theatre-review, Accessed 2021-11-10.

Buonanno G. (2002), *International Actresses on the Victorian Stage*, Il Fiorino, Modena.

Collins P. H. (2000), *Black Feminist Thought*, Routledge, London.

Cracknell C. (2012), *Nora, now:* A Doll's House *film for the modern world*, in "The Guardian", 17 October, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/17/nora-dolls-house-film-modern-world, Accessed 2021-11-20.

Crompton S. (2019*), Review: A Doll's House*, in "WhatsOnStage", 12 September, https://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/reviews/a-dolls-house-lyric-hammersmith_49868.html, Accessed 2022-01-05.

Darlymple W. (2002), *White Mughals*, Penguin, London.

Gupta T. (2019), *A Doll's House*, Oberon Books. Kindle ed., London.

Gupta T., Sierz A. (2010), *Writing Beyond the Stereotypes (Tanika Gupta in conversation with Aleks Sierz)*, in W. Huber *et al.* (eds.), *Staging Interculturality*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, Trier, pp. 37-50.

Finney G. (1994), *Ibsen and Feminism*, in J. McFarlane (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 89-105.

Fischer-Lichte E. (2012), *Introduction*, in E. Fischer-Lichte *et al.* (eds.), *Global Ibsen. Performing Multiple Modernities*, Routledge, London, pp. 1-16.

Hussain Y. (2005), *Writing Diaspora. South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity*, Routledge, London.

Ibsen H. (1972), *Speeches and New Letters*, edited with an introduction by Arne Aldal, Haskell House Publishers, New York.

Jones N. (2019), *Introduction*, in T. Gupta, *Historical Plays*, Oberon, London, pp. 7-21.

Ledger S. (1997), *The New Woman. Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Ledger S. (2002), *Ibsen, the New Woman and the Actress*, in A. Richardson *et al.* (eds.), *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 79-93.

Maxey R. (2011), *South Asian Atlantic Literature, 1970-2010*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Moi T. (2006), *"First and Foremost a Human Being": Idealism, Theatre, and Gender in* A Doll's House', in "Modern Drama", 49, 3, pp. 256-84.

Moi T. (2008), *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Nash J. C. (2011), *'Home Truths' on Intersectionality*, in "Yale Journal of Law and Feminism", 23, 2, pp. 445-70.
Nasta S. (2000), *Homes Without Walls: New Voices in South Asian Writing in Britain*, in R. J. Crane, R. Mohanram (eds.), *Shifting Continents/Colliding Cultures*, Brill Publishing, Amsterdam-New York, pp. 83-102.
Neill H. (2019), *A Doll's House, Lyric Hammersmith review – Ibsen tellingly transposed to colonial India*, 12 September, https://theartsdesk.com/theatre/dolls-house-lyric-hammersmith-review-ibsen-tellingly-transposed-colonial-india, Accessed 2022-01-10.
Newey K. (2005), *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
Ranasinha R. (2016), *Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Women's Fiction. Gender, Narration and Globalisation*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
Räthel C. (2020), *Redecorating* A Doll's House *in Contemporary German Theater-Multiple Authorship in Ibsen's* Nora, in "Ibsen Studies", 20, 1, pp. 67-87.
Robins E. (1928), *Ibsen and the Actress*, The Hogarth Press, London.
Sierz A. (2012), *Introduction*, in T. Gupta, *Political Plays*, Oberon Books, London, pp. 9-16.
Tronicke M. (2019), *Terror by Candlelight: The Affective Politics of Fear in Tanika Gupta's* Lions and Tigers, in "Journal of Contemporary Drama in English", 7, 1, pp. 58-71.
Thieme J. (2001), *Postcolonial Con-texts. Writing Back to the Canon*, Continuum, London.