

# Cultural Context and Feminist Discourse: Comparing Ibsen's Norway and Tagore's India

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## ABSTRACT

Henrik Ibsen and Rabindranath Tagore, though originating from vastly different cultural landscapes of Norway and India, respectively, are revered as literary giants whose works resonate globally, particularly in their exploration of gender roles and feminist discourse. In this comparative analysis, we delve into the cultural contexts of late 19th-century Norway and colonial India, examining how these environments influenced the portrayal of gender and feminist themes in their narratives. Ibsen's critique of patriarchy and Tagore's advocacy for women's autonomy intersect with broader societal shifts, challenging entrenched norms and advocating for women's empowerment. Central to our exploration are the female characters in their works, such as Nora Helmer and Hedda Gabler in Ibsen's plays, and Binodini and Bimala in Tagore's novels, who navigate societal expectations while asserting their agency. Through an analysis of scholarly works and diverse perspectives, we aim to unravel the parallels and distinctions between Ibsen's Norway and Tagore's India in terms of cultural context and feminist discourse. Ultimately, this comparative study sheds light on how literature reflects and contests gender inequality, inspiring ongoing efforts for gender equity worldwide.

**Keywords:** Ibsen, Tagore, Cultural Context, Feminist Discourse, Gender, Women's Empowerment, Global Resonance

## INTRODUCTION

Henrik Ibsen and Rabindranath Tagore, despite geographical and cultural divides, are revered as literary giants whose works resonate globally. Their narratives intricately critique societal norms, especially concerning gender roles and feminist discourse. Hailing from Norway and India respectively, Ibsen and Tagore navigated their cultural landscapes, crafting stories challenging entrenched norms and advocating for women's empowerment. This analysis delves into the cultural contexts of Ibsen's Norway and Tagore's India, exploring how these environments shaped gender portrayal and feminist themes. Norway's shift from agrarianism to industrialization and India's struggle with colonial influences provide backdrops for narratives interrogating societal expectations and advocating women's agency<sup>1</sup>. Central to our exploration is the depiction of female characters. Ibsen's Nora Helmer and Hedda Gabler symbolize liberation from domestic oppression, while Tagore's Binodini and Bimala navigate Indian womanhood, challenging traditional roles amid love, desire, and societal norms. We also examine the feminist discourse within their works. Ibsen's critiques of patriarchy sparked debates in Victorian Europe, while Tagore blended Western feminist ideals with indigenous perspectives, advocating for women's education and autonomy within tradition. Through this comparative journey, we aim to unravel parallels and distinctions between Ibsen's

Norway and Tagore's India, enriching understanding of these masterpieces and insights into the universal struggle for gender equality transcending time and place<sup>2</sup>.

## NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of studying the cultural context and feminist discourse in Ibsen's Norway and Tagore's India lies in its multifaceted contributions to academic inquiry and societal understanding. Firstly, it fosters cross-cultural appreciation by illuminating how cultural specifics shape gender portrayal and feminist perspectives, promoting empathy and understanding across diverse cultural landscapes. Secondly, it enriches literary scholarship by offering new insights into the works of Ibsen and Tagore, deepening interpretations of their portrayals of women and societal critique. Thirdly, it advances feminist theory and activism by providing valuable insights into the ongoing struggle for gender equality and social justice, drawing parallels between historical contexts and contemporary realities. Additionally, it contributes to cultural studies by exploring how literature reflects and shapes cultural values, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration. Ultimately, this study underscores the universal relevance of feminist concerns while highlighting the diverse manifestations of feminist thought across different cultural contexts, thereby enriching our understanding of the complexities surrounding gender, society, and power dynamics.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study sets out to achieve several objectives pertaining to the examination of cultural contexts and feminist discourse within the literary works of Henrik Ibsen and Rabindranath Tagore. Firstly, it aims to delve into the cultural landscapes of late 19th-century Norway and India as depicted in the writings of these two renowned authors. Through this analysis, the study seeks to discern how societal norms and historical influences shaped the portrayal of gender roles and feminist themes in their respective works. Additionally, the study endeavors to compare the representation of gender in Ibsen's Norwegian society and Tagore's colonial-era India, highlighting similarities and differences in the depiction of women's experiences and struggles against patriarchal constraints. Moreover, it seeks to explore the feminist discourses embedded within the literary narratives of Ibsen and Tagore, examining their critiques of patriarchy and advocacy for women's empowerment. By understanding the cross-cultural influences on feminist thought and discourse, the study aims to provide valuable insights for contemporary discussions on gender equality and women's rights, drawing from the comparative analysis of Ibsen's Norway and Tagore's India.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology for comparing Ibsen's Norway and Tagore's India involves selecting representative texts, conducting close literary analysis, and contextualizing within historical and cultural frameworks. Scholars will juxtapose themes and characters, drawing on feminist and postcolonial theories for interpretation. An interdisciplinary approach integrates insights from cultural and gender studies. Adherence to ethical guidelines ensures respect for cultural sensitivities and intellectual property. This methodology enables a comprehensive examination of gender representation and feminist discourse in both authors' works, shedding light on their cultural contexts and contributions to feminist literature.

## Source of Materials

The sources of materials for this study include primary texts by Henrik Ibsen and Rabindranath Tagore, such as "A Doll's House," "Hedda Gabler," "Chokher Bali," and "Ghare-Baire." Secondary sources comprise scholarly articles, books, and essays on feminist theory, literary criticism, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies, encompassing works by scholars such as Joan Templeton, Toril Moi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Uma Das Gupta. Additionally, historical documents, biographies, and critical analyses of late 19th-

century Norway and India provide contextual insights.

### **Range of the Study**

The scope of the research includes a comparative examination of a few works by Tagore and Ibsen, with an emphasis on how they represent gender norms and feminist discourse in relation to their respective cultural settings. The study focuses on Norway and India in the late 19th century, taking into account colonial influences, social politics, and cultural standards of the day. To understand the intricacies of the texts, the study makes use of a variety of theoretical frameworks, such as feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and literary criticism. The study intends to contribute to interdisciplinary studies on gender, literature, and culture by offering a comprehensive understanding of the cultural specificities and universal themes found in the works of Ibsen and Tagore.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Henrik Ibsen and Rabindranath Tagore occupy significant positions in the realms of literature and feminist discourse, their works serving as touchstones for critical analysis and scholarly inquiry. Numerous scholars have explored the thematic resonances and cultural contexts embedded within the narratives of these two literary luminaries, shedding light on the ways in which their writings intersect with issues of gender, society, and feminism<sup>3</sup>.

Scholars including Sandra Saari, Toril Moi, and Joan Templeton have done in-depth analyses of Ibsen's contributions to feminist literature. Templeton explores the depths of Ibsen's female characters in her groundbreaking study "Ibsen's Women," examining their battles against patriarchal tyranny and quests for self-realization. The study "Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism" by Moi delves at the revolutionary influence of Ibsen on modernist writing, specifically in relation to his depiction of women as active agents of change<sup>4</sup>. Saari provides complex readings of Ibsen's female characters in "Ibsen's Women: The Complexities of Femininity," highlighting their complex identities and struggles with social norms.

Similarly, Tagore's exploration of feminist themes has garnered scholarly attention from researchers like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Sangeeta Datta, and Uma Das Gupta. Spivak's "Other Asias" examines Tagore's engagement with feminist and postcolonial discourses, highlighting the subversive potential of his writings in challenging hegemonic power structures<sup>5</sup>. Datta's "Rabindranath Tagore: The Home and the World" provides insights into Tagore's portrayal of women as embodiments of resilience and resistance within the patriarchal confines of Indian society<sup>6</sup>. Das Gupta's "Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man" offers a comprehensive overview of Tagore's literary oeuvre, tracing the evolution of his feminist sensibilities across different genres and contexts<sup>7</sup>.

Moreover, comparative studies between Ibsen and Tagore have yielded illuminating analyses of their respective contributions to feminist discourse explore the thematic convergences and divergences between the two authors, highlighting the ways in which their narratives intersect with broader debates on gender, society, and modernity.

Our comparative analysis, which draws from this extensive corpus of work, aims to expand on previously held beliefs while presenting novel viewpoints on the feminist discourses and cultural settings that are present in Tagore's India and Ibsen's Norway. Through the integration of many academic viewpoints and a critical examination of original works, our goal is to enhance comprehension of the lasting significance of these literary titans in the current discourse surrounding social justice and gender equality.

### **Comparative Literary Studies**

"The International Reception of Ibsen" edited by Errol Durbach and Tore Rem provides insights into how

Ibsen's works were received and interpreted across different cultural contexts, shedding light on the global resonance of his feminist themes.

“Rabindranath Tagore: An Illustrated Life” edited by Uma Das Gupta offers diverse scholarly perspectives on Tagore's life and works, including comparative analyses with other literary figures<sup>8</sup>.

### **Postcolonial Feminist Critique**

“Postcolonial Studies and Beyond” by Ania Loomba explores the intersections of postcolonial theory and feminist critique, offering frameworks for analyzing literature from non-Western contexts, including Tagore's India<sup>9</sup>.

“Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity” by Chandra Talpade Mohanty provides insights into the challenges and possibilities of feminist activism and scholarship across diverse cultural landscapes<sup>10</sup>.

### **Gender and Colonialism**

Understanding how colonial encounters impacted conceptions of gender and femininity in non-Western countries is important for comprehending Tagore's representation of women in colonial India. Reina Lewis' book “Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity, and Representation” provides insights on these developments<sup>11</sup>. Elleke Boehmer's work “Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors” explores how literature both reflects and challenges colonial power dynamics. It offers a prism through which to view Ibsen's criticism of patriarchal standards in the context of European colonopolitanism<sup>12</sup>.

### **Feminist Literary Theory**

The feminist literary theory frameworks offered by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in “The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination” can be used to interpret works by Tagore and Ibsen as well as to gain a foundational understanding of women's representation in literature<sup>13</sup>. The comparative analysis is given more depth and richness by include these extra academic works and viewpoints in the literature study. This enhances our comprehension of the cultural settings and feminist discourses that are present in Ibsen and Tagore's writings.

### **Intersectional Feminism**

“Intersectionality” by Kimberlé Crenshaw introduces the concept of intersectionality, which acknowledges the interconnectedness of social categories such as race, class, and gender. Understanding intersectionality can provide a nuanced lens through which to analyze the experiences of women in both Ibsen's and Tagore's works, considering factors beyond gender alone.

### **Cultural Studies**

Chris Barker's book “Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice” provides a thorough introduction to the procedures used in cultural studies, including textual analysis, audience reception research, and cultural theory<sup>14</sup>. Understanding how Ibsen and Tagore's writings were interpreted by audiences and placed within their own cultural settings can be gained by using cultural studies methodologies.

### **Psychoanalytic Criticism**

“The Interpretation of Dreams” by Sigmund Freud introduces Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which has

been applied to literary analysis to uncover unconscious themes and motivations within texts<sup>15</sup>. Exploring the psychoanalytic dimensions of Ibsen's and Tagore's works can offer deeper insights into the psychological underpinnings of their characters and narratives.

### **Colonial and Postcolonial Theory**

Frantz Fanon's "The Wretched of the Earth" explores how colonization affects colonized peoples psychologically<sup>16</sup>. It is possible to gain insight into how colonialism affected gender dynamics and feminist resistance by utilizing postcolonial theory to analyze Tagore's India.

Homi K. Bhabha's book "The Location of Culture" examines the nuances of cultural identity in the context of colonial and postcolonial civilizations. Analyses of how cultural hybridity and negotiation appear in Tagore's depictions of gender and feminism can benefit from an understanding of Bhabha's theories.

### **Global Feminism**

"Global Feminisms Since 1945" edited by Bonnie G. Smith offers insights into feminist movements and ideologies across different regions and historical periods<sup>17</sup>. Understanding global feminist perspectives can enrich comparative analyses of Ibsen's and Tagore's works by situating them within broader feminist discourses.

### **Literary Translation Studies**

"Translation Studies" by Susan Bassnett provides an overview of translation theory and its implications for understanding the reception and interpretation of literary texts across cultures<sup>18</sup>. Considering the role of translation in disseminating Ibsen's and Tagore's works globally can offer insights into how their feminist themes resonate across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

By incorporating these diverse scholarly perspectives into the literature review, the comparative analysis gains a multidimensional understanding of the cultural contexts and feminist discourses in Ibsen's Norway and Tagore's India.

## **MAIN DISCUSSION**

### **Cultural Context**

In order to fully comprehend the feminist discourse and the cultural context of Henrik Ibsen's Norway and Rabindranath Tagore's India, one must have a thorough understanding of the sociocultural backgrounds of both nations during the playwrights' respective periods of activity. This understanding also extends to an in-depth analysis of the themes, characters, and narratives found in each play.

### **Henrik Ibsen's Norway**

Ibsen was active during the latter half of the 19th century, a period marked by significant social and political change in Norway. Norway was transitioning from a rural, agrarian society to a more industrialized and urbanized one. The Norwegian society was deeply influenced by conservative values and patriarchal norms, where women's roles were primarily confined to domestic spheres. The emergence of the women's rights movement and the demand for greater gender equality began to challenge traditional gender roles in Norwegian society.

## Rabindranath Tagore's India

Tagore lived during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a time of immense social, political, and cultural upheaval in India. India was under British colonial rule, which significantly impacted its socio-cultural landscape. Indian society was characterized by a complex system of caste hierarchy, patriarchal structures, and conservative social norms. The Indian women's movement was gaining momentum, spurred by pioneers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others who advocated for women's education and social reformation.

### Gender Roles

**Ibsen's Norway:** In Ibsen's plays such as "A Doll's House" and "Hedda Gabler," he depicted the restrictive gender roles imposed on women in Victorian society. Women were expected to fulfill domestic duties and obey their husbands, with limited opportunities for personal fulfillment or independence<sup>1</sup>.

**Tagore's India:** Tagore's works often portrayed the complexities of gender roles within the Indian context. While traditional gender norms were prevalent, Tagore also explored the agency and autonomy of women, especially in works like "Chokher Bali" and "Ghare-Baire," where female characters challenge societal expectations.

### Feminist Discourse

**Ibsen's Norway:** Ibsen is often considered a pioneer of feminist literature for his exploration of women's rights and autonomy. His plays critiqued the patriarchal norms of his time and advocated for women's liberation and self-realization. "A Doll's House," in particular, sparked controversy with its portrayal of a woman's decision to leave her husband in pursuit of personal freedom.

**Tagore's India:** Tagore's feminist discourse was influenced by both Western feminist ideas and traditional Indian perspectives on women's roles. While he addressed issues such as women's education and empowerment, his approach was nuanced, often highlighting the tensions between tradition and modernity, as seen in works like "The Home and the World."

### Comparative Analysis

**Compare the portrayal of female characters:** Analyze how Ibsen and Tagore depict their female characters, considering their agency, autonomy, and struggles against societal norms.

**Examine the treatment of feminist themes:** Evaluate how each author explores feminist themes such as gender inequality, women's rights, and the constraints of patriarchal society.

**Consider cultural influences:** Reflect on how the cultural contexts of Norway and India shape the portrayal of gender and feminism in Ibsen's and Tagore's works.

The main discussion of "Cultural Context and Feminist Discourse: Comparing Ibsen's Norway and Tagore's India" revolves around the exploration of how the cultural contexts of late 19th-century Norway and India influenced the portrayal of gender roles and feminist themes in the works of Henrik Ibsen and Rabindranath Tagore, respectively.

**Gender Roles and Societal Norms:** In Ibsen's Norway, societal expectations dictated rigid gender roles, with women primarily confined to domestic spheres and subservient to patriarchal authority. Tagore's India similarly grappled with traditional norms that limited women's autonomy and agency. However, Tagore's

portrayal also reflects the complexities of Indian society, where women's roles intersected with caste, religion, and colonial influences.

**Female Agency and Liberation:** Both Ibsen and Tagore depicted female characters who challenged societal norms and sought liberation from oppressive structures. Nora Helmer's iconic door slam in "A Doll's House" and Binodini's defiance in "Chokher Bali" exemplify women's quests for autonomy and self-realization amidst patriarchal constraints.

**Feminist Discourse and Critique<sup>10</sup>:** Both writers participated in feminist discourse through their writings, challenging the restrictions placed on women and promoting their agency and rights. While Tagore's writings addressed issues of education, empowerment, and women's status in the public sphere within the framework of colonial India, Ibsen's plays spurred discussions about women's responsibilities in society.

**Cultural Specificities and Universal issues:** Ibsen and Tagore's writings speak to universal issues of feminist struggle and gender oppression, even as they are firmly grounded in their own cultural contexts. Their stories speak to the global fight for social justice and gender equality, transcending national borders.

**Comparative Analysis:** A comparative analysis reveals both similarities and differences in the portrayal of gender and feminist discourse between Ibsen's Norway and Tagore's India. While both authors grapple with patriarchal norms, their approaches reflect the unique socio-cultural landscapes of their respective societies.

**Relevance to Contemporary Discourse:** The discussion extends to the relevance of Ibsen's and Tagore's works in contemporary feminist discourse. Their critiques of gender inequality and calls for women's liberation remain pertinent today, inspiring ongoing efforts to challenge gender norms and advance gender equity globally.

Overall, the main discussion underscores the significance of contextualizing literature within its cultural milieu and highlights the enduring relevance of Ibsen's and Tagore's contributions to feminist discourse. Through a comparative lens, this analysis deepens our understanding of the complexities of gender, culture, and society, offering insights into the universality of feminist struggles across time and place.

To further substantiate the title "Cultural Context and Feminist Discourse: Comparing Ibsen's Norway and Tagore's India," it's essential to delve into specific examples from the works of Henrik Ibsen and Rabindranath Tagore that exemplify the intersection of cultural context and feminist discourse.

**Exploring Cultural Specificities:** In Ibsen's "A Doll's House," Nora's decision to leave her husband reflects the cultural norms of late 19th-century Norwegian society, where women were expected to prioritize their roles as wives and mothers above personal fulfillment. Conversely, Tagore's "Chokher Bali" portrays Binodini's struggles within the complexities of Indian society, including the stigma surrounding widowhood and the constraints imposed by traditional gender roles.

**Critiquing Patriarchal Structures:** Both Ibsen and Tagore offer scathing critiques of patriarchal structures in their respective societies. In "Hedda Gabler," Hedda's tragic fate highlights the consequences of women's lack of agency and autonomy within a patriarchal system. Similarly, Tagore's portrayal of Bimala in "Ghare-Baire" exposes the limitations placed on women's participation in the public sphere under colonial rule, illustrating the intersections of gender and imperialism.

**Feminist Themes and Empowerment:** Despite the cultural differences between Norway and India, Ibsen and Tagore both champion feminist themes of empowerment and self-realization. Nora's realization of her own worth and agency in "A Doll's House" and Binodini's assertion of independence in "Chokher Bali" serve as powerful assertions of women's rights to autonomy and self-determination, transcending cultural boundaries.

**Global Influence and Reception:** The global reception of Ibsen's and Tagore's works underscores their impact on feminist discourse beyond their respective cultural contexts. Ibsen's plays sparked feminist movements in Europe and beyond, while Tagore's writings resonated with feminist activists in colonial India and beyond, demonstrating the universality of their feminist critiques.

**Legacy and Contemporary Relevance:** The enduring legacy of Ibsen's and Tagore's works lies in their continued relevance to contemporary feminist discourse. Their exploration of gender inequality, women's rights, and patriarchal oppression resonates with modern audiences, inspiring ongoing efforts to challenge gender norms and promote gender equality worldwide.

By analyzing these examples and drawing connections between Ibsen's Norway and Tagore's India, the discussion further underscores the intricate interplay between cultural context and feminist discourse in shaping literary representations of gender and society. Through comparative analysis, we gain a deeper appreciation of the complexities of feminist thought and activism across different cultural landscapes, enriching our understanding of the global struggle for gender equality.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of Henrik Ibsen's Norway and Rabindranath Tagore's India illuminates the intricate interplay between cultural context and feminist discourse in shaping literary representations of gender and society. Through an exploration of seminal works such as "A Doll's House," "Hedda Gabler," "Chokher Bali," and "Ghare-Baire," we discern how societal norms, historical influences, and colonial legacies intersect with feminist themes of agency, autonomy, and resistance. Both Ibsen and Tagore offer nuanced critiques of patriarchal structures, portraying female characters who challenge societal expectations and assert their right to self-realization. While rooted in their respective cultural milieus, their works transcend geographical boundaries, resonating with universal themes of gender inequality and feminist empowerment. Their persistent influence highlights how relevant their writings are to today's feminist discourse and motivates continuous initiatives to question gender norms and advance gender equity across the globe. This comparative study improves our comprehension of the complexity of feminist thought and activism across many cultural landscapes by contrasting Tagore's India with Ibsen's Norway. By means of comparative analysis, we are able to reveal similarities and differences that illuminate the common and particular difficulties that women encounter across various regions of the globe. In the conclusion, this study highlights how crucial it is to understand literature in the context of its cultural setting in order to improve our understanding of the global fight for social justice and gender equality.

## RECOMMENDATION

Reading this article offers a compelling journey through the literary landscapes of Henrik Ibsen's Norway and Rabindranath Tagore's India, providing valuable insights into the cultural contexts and feminist discourses of the late 19th century. By examining the portrayal of gender roles and feminist themes in works such as "A Doll's House" and "Chokher Bali," readers gain a deeper understanding of how societal norms and historical influences shape narratives of empowerment and resistance. This comparative analysis not only enriches appreciation for the masterpieces of Ibsen and Tagore but also fosters cross-cultural understanding and insight into the universal struggle for gender equality. Whether you're a literature enthusiast, a feminist scholar, or simply curious about the intersections of culture and activism, this article promises to enlighten and inspire.

## LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

While this comparative analysis offers valuable insights into the cultural contexts and feminist discourses of



Ibsen's Norway and Tagore's India, it has certain limitations. Firstly, the study's focus on a select few works by each author may not fully capture the breadth of their contributions to feminist literature. Additionally, the examination primarily centers on the late 19th century, potentially overlooking developments in feminist thought beyond this period. Moreover, the comparative approach, while illuminating, may oversimplify the complexities of cultural dynamics and historical contexts. Lastly, the reliance on secondary sources for analysis could introduce biases or overlook nuances present in the primary texts. Thus, readers should approach this study as a starting point for further exploration rather than a definitive account of gender representation in Ibsen and Tagore's works.

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