

# **Feminism in Heneric Ibsen's A Dolls' House**

**By:**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper investigates the role of women and their right in Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House (1879). Ibsen, one of the world's greatest dramatists, is considered as the father of modern drama, and as one of the great supporters of women. He never calls himself a feminist, and he is more a humanist. There are indeed plenty of feminist tendencies in his plays, based on Simone de Beauvoir's System of marriage, stressing on individuality of women and fighting for their freedom, in addition protesting to all restrictions in society. Under the impact of Ibsen's ideology, individuality and humanity are the most important social issues which are developed in his works. All social instructions and conventions are the enemy of every individual because they restrict the characters' personal identity and their freedom. In particular, Ibsen expands this outlook on the women's position whose individual and freedom are taken by masculine society . Ibsen protests against the position of women in a masculine society which is unfair and under the hegemony of male – dominated powers.

**Keywords:** Nora Helmer's, Henrik Ibsen, Dolls House, Feminism, Images, Women's challenge, control ,men.

## **Section One**

### **1-1 . Introduction**

A Doll's House is Ibsen's masterpiece. A critic has remarked that the play exploded like a bomb into contemporary life. The play is Feminism play or a . Feminism deals with in the play is what is the position or status of woman in relation to her husband like G.B. show, Ibsen does not offer any solution to present the solution is left to the readers.

The dramatist shows us the sad consequences of the subordination of a married woman to the control of her husband. However, the play is not about women's emancipation in the modern sense of the term 'emancipation'. Yet it can be called a 'Feminist Play' though Ibsen has refused to accept the fact.

*The problem in the play is presented through the story of Nora and her husband , Torvald Helmer.* Helmer treats Nora as a pet. He love Nora but

the words he uses to address her show that he regards her as a kind of pet. He calls her a little sky/ark chirping happy. He also asks her if his 'little squirrel' is frisking about. These words of love but it is the love of a superior for somebody lower in rank. This superiority is seen in other activities of Helmer also. He lays down some rules for Nora for running the household.

**There are two main reasons** which lead to the whole trouble between Helmer and Nora. **First, Helmer regards Nora as his property.** He believes that she belongs to him completely. When he is amorous (of love) mood, he says that her beauty and lovingness belong to him. He calls Nora his 'doubly his poverty'. Second reason for the breakdown of the Helmer's marriage is the failure of Nora's expectations regarding her husband. Nora feels that her husband will take her guilt on his shoulders. So she has decided to commit suicide. But Helmer proves to be selfish. He reacts to Krogstads letter very angrily and scolds Nora for it. But when the danger is over, he comes to his original position.

Towards the end of the play, there is **a sudden change in Nora.** As she discovers the true character of Helmer, she decides to leave him. When Helmer tries to stop her, she gives the reasons for leaving him. **First,** she learns that before marriage she was her fathers' 'baby-doo'. After her marriage, Helmer treated her as his 'doll-wife'.

**Secondly,** Nora has realized that she has a mind of her own. She wants to educate herself in order to establish her own identity .

The paper is a feministic study of Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House. Feminism discusses the injustices against women which extend into the structure of our society and the contents of our culture and permeates our consciousness , Ibsen claimed that his play was about liberation a more general, human sense, rather than specifically about female liberation. If feminism focuses on both men and women, it is reasonable to see the mutual liberation of Torvald and Nora as a feminist goal, liberation people of both from social and cultural limitations based on gender. Consider the various women in the play as well. The problem of Ibsen's social drama is consistent through all his works. In A Doll's House (1879 ), he especially probed the social problem passively assigned to women in a male-oriented society.

After considering the plight of Nora Helmer, he then investigated what would have happened if she had remained at home .In A Doll's House, Ibsen is concerned with the problem of women's position in society. The

theme that is more interesting to him in this play is the duties towards oneself and achieving the individuality and individual rights in the society.

*Indeed*, in a patriarchal society which is controlled by men's rules, woman, should try to get her rights . A Doll's House is a tragedy in which Nora leaves her house by slamming of a door to the world of new possibilities. She is going off to know her own responsibilities towards herself. This kind of self-realization, which usually leads to a new beginning, is one of Ibsen's main ideologies posed in his play. Nora opens her eyes and observes that her individuality and freedom have been taken in living with Torvald Helmer. Nora is a woman who will not go on living her life on illusions and with a strange man anymore.

Helmer has lived according to the reasons and rationality of a man, his point of view is based on power and order. For such a systematized, disciplinary man, reputation is more important than sacrificing himself for the family life. Now he sees that only the hope of a miracle is left since reason no longer accomplishes anything Nora's winning of her individual freedom is for self-development whereby she is to become a person in her own right and also in the sight of others. She has discovered painfully that she has been treated as a nullity and that this must be changed , Parenthood has been a kind of adulthood in literature for many years. As the drama's title announces and as Nora herself confirms in the last act, marriage and motherhood have been for her a kind of existence in a doll's house in which she has played with her children, with Helmer and even with her father before her marriage. In order to reach the real maturity, she must leave this life behind. Hence, after passing a long bitter experience, she comes to the conclusion that it is worthwhile to leave her family to achieve her independence and individuality . In A Doll's House, the readers deal with the rigid morality of Helmer, and the desire woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day of his wife is to sacrifice herself thoroughly for his sake. In such a society run by masculine laws with no emotions, Nora stops her flow of feeling and says we have never sat down in earnest together to try and get at the bottom of anything . This assertion is one of the key sentences in the Feminist approach, since it expresses the moment of revelation when Nora notices that she has been treated as a second hand creature and her indisputable rights have been ignored. Also Nora's declaration is the climax of the play, which can be considered as an exordium of new technique and subject in the modern drama. Although as in the

classical genre, the rising action reaches its highest point, based on a magnificent and lofty subject ; A Doll's House is about a serious discussion between a husband and a wife which is one of the basic elements of modern drama . Due to her reasons, she cannot stay in her doll's house any longer. No more emotion and sacrifice work here She refuses to submit to her husband anymore and wants to face the world on her own. According to the male dominated society, Nora has done an unthinkable action as a middle-class woman in ordinary circumstances. But to the female one, she wants to prove herself as an independent human being and is continuing to struggle for the self-realization of her true self. Up to that time few women had profited from individualism. Before Nora, no woman in fiction had ever taken such a courageous action .

## **Section Two**

### **2-1. Definition Of Feminism**

The term feminism is a collection or set of movements towards having equivalent economic, political, cultural and social rights in the society for women as well as men. Flax explores his definition of feminism in this way, —Feminist theories call for a trans valuation of values—a rethinking of our ideas about what is just, humanly excellent, worthy of praise, moral, and so forth (Flax,1990, p:21) .

Feminism is a movement to end sexism , sexist exploitation oppression .By naming sexism as the problem it went directly to the heart of matter ,It is a definition which implies that all sexist thinking the action is the problem , whether those who persuade are male or female , child or adult , It is also broad enough to include an understanding of systematic institutionalized sexism ( Hooks ,2000 ,7 ). Feminist politics is losing momentum because feminist movement has lost clear definitions . Feminists are made not born . One does not become an advocate of feminist politics simply by having the privilege of having born female . When women first organized in groups to talk together about the issue of sexism and male (Hooks ,2000 , 6 ). They were clear that females were as socialized to believe sexist thinking and values as male , the difference being simply that males benefitted from sexism more

than females and were as a consequence less likely to women to surrender patriarchal privilege (Hooks , 2000 ,1)

## **2-2 . Development Of The Concept Of Feminism**

History exposes women's long and untiring struggle to make them visible and to capsize the patriarchal social order. "One of the most powerful things feminism has done, is to create new language and meanings which provide women ways of naming and understanding their own experiences" (Kelly, 1994: 178). Language, the product of society is an emblem of women's coercion. The most powerful gender, the man, always imposes his own definition of the masculinity and femininity; man considers woman the other' (Beauvoir, 1949:20). As the one who is not oneself "If men are active, women must be passive, if men represent evil all the negative characteristics of humanity, as men perceive them, are projected on to women" (Beauvoir, 1949: 23). Regarding language and its symbolic meanings, Sree writes that " it is difficult for women to express their feelings in a language which is chiefly made by men" (Sree, 2008:28). So a language is needed which at best can facilitate the women to break their silence and to express their feelings and ideas. Butler writes: "She argues that the semiotic potential of language is subversive and describes the semiotic as a poetic- maternal linguistic practice that disrupts the symbolic, understood as culturally intelligible rule-governed speech" (Butler 1989: 104).

A Dolls' House since its publication, the feminist studies at the play have reputed its author as a feminist writer. In recent times, a feminist study of the play by Yuehua has exposed the conflicts between the male and female " to reveal male misconception of women and causes that entail men's Power" (Yuehua, 2009: 79). A Doll's House was enthusiastically welcomed by feminist thinkers in Norway and throughout Europe and States that in closing the door on her husband and children , Nora opened the way to the turn of the century women's movement ( Finney , 1994:91).Unfortunately ,Eleanor's own Dolls House existence imploded in 1898 when her partner who was a founder of the socialist league a spokesman for Darwinian evolution and co-translator of volume ( Durbach ,1994:234).

Nonetheless , Durbach identifies Marx as the first of Ibsen's feminist critics classifying her socialist feminism as class- based rather than gender –

based in contrast to Bourgeois Feminists who call for political economic and social parity and radical Feminists who insist on irreconcilable conflict between male and female .This first-wave feminism was exemplified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century literary phenomenon of “ The New Woman “. A type of heroine who challenged the restrictions set valued self- fulfillment and in dependence rather than the traditional ideal of self –sacrifice .Ibsen’s plays A Dolls House (1879)and (1890)foregrounded such new women ( Finney , 1994:95).This literary outpouring on the part of Ibsen and others contributed to the success of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century women’s suffrage movement and in 1913 Norway became the second country in Europe ( after Finland) to have full suffrage for women .However the appearance of the jazz-age ( Finch , 1989:5).

Second – wave feminism began in the early 1960 on a more individual level encouraging women to examine personal and cultural aspects of their lives in the light of power structures and discrimination in the home , the workplace , and in terms of reproductive rights .This type of feminism still continues , but its over-emphasis on the experience of middle class white women gave rise in the early 1990s to third – wave feminism , with its poststructuralist interpretation of gender sexuality . Diversity and change and its focus on the young the poor , and minority voters (Hawkesworth , 2004 :24).

## **Section Three**

### **3-1.The Role Of Women In A Doll’s House**

A Dolls' House was first published in 1879. It deals with the painful lives of the middle class women in a society ruled by patriarchal laws. The action takes place in the drawing room of Torvald Helmer. From the very first page, we are introduced to Helmer's wife, Nora. Nora's first two dialogues are exchanged with the porter who brings the Christmas tree inside the room. Her third dialogue is exchanged with her husband. Torvald Helmer, who calls her from his room. "Is that my little lark twittering out there" (Ibsen, 2010:04). In this sentence three lexemes can be marked to show the symbolic concept. 'My', 'little' and 'lark' all connote to the patriarchal concepts associated with woman. 'My' refers to the sense of possession very much the part and parcel of male gender. Woman is considered a belonging, a

possession a property. Father, brother husband, and then son are her possessors and owners who have an ultimate control of her being. Her own feelings, desires, ideas, notions, opinions are of no value. She has to lead her life according to the frame work framed for her by her possessors. A Dolls' House is replete with hundreds of such lexemes and phrases where Nora is treated as possession by Torvald Helmer. (Ibsen, 2010: 07).

Nora, the female protagonist of The Doll's House, acts as Ibsen's mouthpiece of the woman emancipation. Ibsen's essence, that nothing is truer than humanity. Her motto is "Let humanism be the other name of religion". When it comes to saving her husband's life, she needs to arrange money immediately. She cannot increase the anxiety of her father by letting him know the bad health condition of her husband. Here Krogstad wants to take advantage from her helplessness by threats and tricks. If some sense of guilt or corruption crosses Nora's mind, it is the bourgeois society that is responsible for this. This society is liable for inculcating the pricks of undue conscience in her mind. Her obstinate insisting Helmer on retaining Krogstad's job results from her desire to see the family happy. (Northam, :1965: 103 )

Nora is almost hysterical with terror at the thought of her situation—almost, but it is part of her character that with great heroism she keeps her fears secret to herself; and it is because of her reticence that Rank is dramatically necessary to symbolize the horror she will not talk about

### **3-2. Womens challenge to Men's power In A Doll's House**

Ideological power is reflected not only in the male characters in the plays, but the female characters also show their strong ideas about gender relationship, which is a demonstration of their challenge to masculine power. As Bertens points out: "Once the social and cultural restraints on women have been lifted, women will be as autonomous and self-determining as men" (Bertens, 2001: 101)

Though Nora is treated like a doll child first by her father and then by her husband and is never allowed to evolve as a person, beneath her twittering, girlish exterior is a woman who has the potential to be independent and forceful. Her first challenge to masculine power is her idea of her act to borrow money from Krogstad by forging her father's signature. She considers her

decision moral and abuses the law as “foolish”, a fault of the lawmakers who were surely men. When confronted with Krogstad, the money shark, she challenges the man’s threat by stating out her understanding of her act that involves some moral standard, “Is a daughter not to be allowed to spare her dying father anxiety and care? Is a wife not to be allowed to save her husband’s life? I don’t know much about law; but I am certain that there must be laws permitting such things as that. Have you no knowledge of such laws—you who are a lawyer? You must be a very poor lawyer, Mr. Krogstad” (Ibsen, p. 24).

Nora is naive; it’s her fantasy that her husband will take all the responsibility for her once the secret of her forgery is released. However, her fantasy breaks when Torvald refuses to shoulder the responsibility for her by informing her that “no man would sacrifice his honor for the one he loves” (Ibsen, 2010: 66). She can no longer hold her resentment and states:

*“When I lived at home with Papa, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed from him I concealed the fact, because he would not have liked it. He called me his little-doll child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls. And when I came to live with you... I was simply transferred from Papa’s hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your tastes, and so I got the same tastes as you—or else I pretended to. I’m really not quite sure which – I think sometimes the one and sometimes the other. When I look back on it, it seems to me I had been living here like a poor woman – just from hand to mouth. I’ve existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it. You and Papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I’ve made nothing of my life. ... But our home has been nothing but a playroom. I’ve been your doll-wife, just as at home I was Papa’s doll-child; and here the children have been my dolls. I thought it great fun when you played with me, just as they thought it great fun when I played with them. That is what our marriage has been, Torvald” (Ibsen, p. 64).*

This famous manifestation of her strong resentment of a woman towards patriarchy is no more than a mirror of the suppressed life of women under the

patriarchal system in the 19th century Europe. Therefore, Nora has an epiphany about her life. She suddenly realizes that she has known nothing but what the men in her life have told her; she has not been able to live or even think for herself. It is then that she realizes how much she has been wronged, that she is only a plaything, a doll to Torvald. In her disillusionment she says, "You have never loved me. You have only thought it pleasant to be in love with me" (Ibsen, 2010: 63).

### **3-4. In A Doll's House Mens Loss of Power**

Men enjoy social power and many forms of privilege by virtue of being male. Torvald lives in a world of men power because of his privilege of political and economic position in the society that ensures him the capacity to exercise power and control over public and domestic life associated with women, especially his wife Nora. According to Kiberd, "Ibsen's account of the sufferings of couples who reject the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, only to face more daunting social and personal problems in their attempt at an honest sexuality, seemed ...the central issue of the age" These "problems" derive not from their everyday domestic chores, but from their struggle for power of control in the ideological realm. This struggle is progressing under the façade of proper relationship between husband and wife in the first part of the play, but is involved in a series of conflicts between the characters and finally develops into a life-and-death struggle for their social and political role. (Kiberd, 1985: 63).

"The challenge of feminism to men is one of dislodging the hegemonic masculine psyche. This is not a psychological interpretation of change because it is the social challenge to men's power and the actual reduction of men's social power that is the source of change" . As matter of fact, the process of the struggle of power is not as important as compared with the consequences it has brought to both the male and female characters. Considering the ending of the power struggle reflected in the play, men's lose of power is not without some tragic elements. Nora's final exit is a good example of feminism that challenges men's power and brings immense pain to men who are still ignorant of the loss of their power, which gives rise to men's bewilderment in face of reality—that despite their effort to safeguard the realm of men's absolute power over women, the strength of power women display become more and

more prominent. Torvald has fought vigorously a battle with their female counterparts in hope of achieving success in maintaining their masculine power and obtaining control over their counterparts. However, Torvald's practice of power does not help him to fulfill his perception towards reality, but makes him alienated from it. (Kaufman, 2000: 25). It seems that Torvald does not experience great inner conflicts during his confrontation with his opponents. But there are moments when he experiences great mental pain in his exercise of this power. As a newly appointed manager of the bank, Torvald enjoys prestige and political power outside his domestic life. But his unsuccessful dealing with his wife brings him fear and anxiety about his political life. When he reads Krogstad's letter and finds out his wife's secret, he senses great horror. His emotional outbreak to Nora "You have destroyed all my happiness. You have ruined all my future" (Ibsen, 1959: 60) .

## **Section Four**

### **4-1. Women Is Control In The Play**

A Dolls' House "was enthusiastically welcomed by feminist thinkers in Norway and throughout Europe" and states that, "In closing the door on her husband and children, Nora opened the way to the turn-of-the-century women's movement" (Finne, 1992:91). Matinee performance of Ibsen's plays in London between 1880 and 1900, were overwhelmingly attended by women, who had assembled in force to do honor to the master who headed the revolt of her sex" (Barstow, 2001:387).

Unfortunately, Eleanors own Doll's House existence imploded in 1898 when her partner, who was a founder of the socialist league, a spokesman for Darwinian evolution and co- translator of volume 1 of Marx's , was found to be a bigamist and deeply in . Nonetheless, Durbach identifies, Eleanor Marx as the first of Ibsen's feminist critics, classifying her Socialist Feminism (which continues in the work of contemporary dramatists such as Caryl (Churchill) as class- based rather than gender-based , in contrast to Bourgeois Feminists, who call for political, economic and social parity, and Radical Feminists, who insist on irreconcilable conflict between male and female. This first- wave feminism was exemplified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century literary phenomenon of " The New Woman", a type of heroine who challenged the restrictions set by male- dominated society and valued self-fulfillment and independence rather than the traditional ideal of self- sacrifice (Finney, 1994:95).

Ibsen's plays A Dolls' House (1879) and Hedda Gabler (1890) for grounded such New Women. This literary outpouring on the part of Ibsen and others contributed to the success of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century women's suffrage movement and in 1913 Norway became the second country in Europe (after Finland) to have full suffrage for women. In the 1920 s and the international legalization of 'votes for women' , confirmed by the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, brought this phase of feminism to a close (Hawkesworth, 2004: 962).

According to Bertens, “Ideology is seen as such a strong presence in the text that we more or less have to break down its resistance to get at a truer picture of the reality the text pretends to present” (Bertens, 2001: 91). The truer picture of ideological struggle for power in A Doll's House is the undertone that the supposedly ideologically submissive and controlled objects are not really what the controllers think they are. Considering the power struggle between the males and the females in the play, here comes the question: who is really in control? It is suggested in the play that the ideologically controlled characters, the females, would not easily reconcile themselves with the oppression from the patriarchal power. They have never given up their fight in the struggle for gender power. They are, as a matter of fact, more tactful and persistent in their resolution of winning over their share of power. To a certain extent, they are stronger in character and will power, with a deeper insight into their counterparts, causing their counterparts experience conflicts and contradictions as well as pain. It goes without saying that their manipulation of their power in their ideological struggle with males is more forceful and destructive to the males, who, as Kaufman points out:

*“There is, in the lives of men, a strange combination of power and powerlessness, privilege and pain. Men enjoy social power and many forms of privilege by virtue of being male. But the way we have set up that world of power causes immense pain, isolation, and alienation not only for women but also for men. This is not to equate men's pain with the systemic and systematic forms of women's oppression. Rather, it is to say that men's worldly power*

*—as we sit in our homes or walk the street, apply ourselves at work  
or march through history—comes with a price for us. This combination  
of power and pain is the hidden story in the lives of men.  
This is men’s contradictory experience of power.”*

A Doll’s House starts seemingly as far from realism as a play can get, with both Nora and Torvald being characterized almost stereotypically. Torvald plays the patriarchal male figure to his little-doll wife Nora, who really requires the guidance of a wise adult man to help her through life’s problems. However, Nora is by no means the stereotypical stay-at-home housewife. It is only with her husband that the façade continues, which is a revelation of a false mask of the pair’s relationship based on illusion. On the surface, the male protagonist Torvald is in control. However, though Torvald seems to have great power over everything, he is constantly in conflict with the world in which he displays his masculine power. His exercise of power brings him a conceited sense of manliness, but meanwhile, as his conception of manliness contradicts with reality, it is also a process of experience of pain and alienation (Kaufman, 2000: 23)

## **Conclusion**

A Dolls' House reflects and articulates the vital motives and interests of human beings as living organisms. In addition to its initial significance for feminist and women's' rights activities, the play continues to be relevant and meaningful to 21<sup>st</sup> century readers and audiences, for whom Darwinism is a familiar and valid construction of reality. One can think of each illusion as a wall of Nora's dollhouse; each time Nora recognizes the incongruity between reality and her doll house, a wall is torn down. At the start of the play, the house has three walls (the fourth wall being open to the audience), and at the end of the play, all the walls have been razed, leaving Nora free

In conclusion of the play is in the favors of women. So it can be called a feminist play. Though Ibsen has dented it. This is because, it advocates the rights of the women, and especially of wives in relation to their husband. The

play is not about female emancipation. It, however arouses in us sympathy for women. The play gives us the message that husbands should not exploit wives. And this is the very problem dealt with in the play.

We can say that "A Dolls' House" is a fine play, dealing with social reality. It is about problem of marriage and deals with the same theme. It gives us a message too. The time has come for each and every woman in whatever way we can confront the controversial values once held be universal truths by our culture." Indeed, society condemns Nora's decision to abandon her duties as wife and mother: she is unfeminine, and Ibsen, while creating her, has flouted the conventions not only of morality but of literary composition. Nora resists and rejects the domestic role and acts in opposition to the social conventions and morals. The problem portrayed in the play is about women's rights, as human's rights. It is about the need for every woman to find out herself and stand on her feet in order to recognize the truth about herself, her life and her society. Moreover, it is about the need of every woman for self-discovery and acting based on the truth even though that truth is opposed to the social acceptance and for fighting against social conventions in the search of the truth.

**Thus** , I think that the main idea in A Doll's House, which centers around Nora, is about independence. Nora has an oppressive husband who thinks of her as a child. The theme draws attention to how capable women are in their own right. Nora, has successfully borrowed money to help her sick husband, she has kept this a secret from him. She realizes that at the end of the book, she must go out on her own, alone, without her children. The courage of women in this period to prove, in the presence of enormous prejudice against a woman's right to individuality of thought, that they are capable individuals separate and distinct from their husbands, brothers or fathers. Women are viable citizens who can make valuable contributions to society, they do not have to be protected and cared for by men all their lives.

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المساوات في مسرحية لعبة البيت لهنرك ابسن  
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الملخص

هذا البحث هو حول دور النساء وحقوق النساء في مسرحية لعبة البيت لهنرك ابسن الذي كتب المسرحية بتاريخ 1879 وتعتبر هذه المسرحيات من المسرحيات العالمية والكاتب يلقب ابو المسرح المتجدد. في هذا البحث تم التركيز على دور المرأة في البيت ونظرة الرجل لها من خلال قيامها بواجبها اتجاه اسرتها من الاطفال والزوج. وقد اعطيت معنى المساوات تعريفا ومصطلحا وتطور هذا المفهوم وكذلك شرحت دور النساء في هذه المسرحية والتي بطلتها هي نورة زوجة هيلمر ومن جانب اخر بينت كيف ان المرأة هي المحور الاساسي في هذه المسرحية اما في الخاتمة بينت كيف ان نورة تركت بيتها واطفالها من اجل ان تكون شخصية مستقلة لها

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الباحثة

المدرس المساعد / حليلة اسماعيل ردام  
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