



PATRIARCHAL DOLLS AND DIGITAL GIRLFRIENDS: FEMINIST AGENCY, HYPERMASCULINITY, AND THE REIMAGINING OF NORA IN RAHUL RAVINDRAN'S *THE GIRLFRIEND* (2025) AND HENRIK IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

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Abstract: Rahul Ravindran's Telugu film *The Girlfriend* (2025) has been described as a redress of the hypermasculine "campus hero" figure popularized by the film *Arjun Reddy* (2017). This article shows how the film performs an intertextual culturally relevant adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) where, instead of the legal-economic conditions on Nora Helmer's emancipation, one finds emotional, social and digital conditions on Bhooma Devi's emancipation within twenty first century Indian dating culture. Interpreting these two texts in the light of Simone de Beauvoir's theory of woman as constructed Other, Virginia Woolf's emphasis on intellectual and material independence, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, R. W. Connell's hegemonic masculinity model, and Bell hooks's theory of possessive attachment and care, the article argues this: in both fictions, intimate love's enclosed or protective nature comes to the fore, and in the crisis of the drama the heroines discover self-authorship. The divergent procedures of the two dramas suggest that, whereas Torvald's power is performed through Victorian marriage law, Vikram's power is deployed in informal technologies of control, such as gossip networks, campus reputation, and social networks, which are indicative of public patriarchy replacing private patriarchy, as described by Sylvia Walby. The article concludes by noting the limitations of comparing a highly scripted, reviewed 2025 film to a canonical, heavily edited nineteenth-century play and points towards future empirical and reception studies.

Key Words: feminist agency; hypermasculinity; coercive control; *A Doll's House*; *The Girlfriend*; eternal myth of femininity; Indian cinema; public and private patriarchy

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian popular cinema has long romanticized the "angry young man" and the brooding, possessive hero whose aggression is recorded as passionate love. Films such as *The Girlfriend* (2025) and *Arjun Reddy* (2017) elevated physical dominance, possessiveness, and emotional repression to markers of authentic manhood and romantic intensity. Rahul Ravindran's *The Girlfriend*, released theatrically on 7 November 2025 and later available on Netflix, deliberately inverts this template. Marketed and received in the Telugu press as "Arjun Reddy in reverse," the film refuses to glorify the domineering male lead; instead, it centers the woman's suffocation under, and eventual departure from, hypermasculine expectation.

Bhooma Devi, an introverted MA Literature student who reads Virginia Woolf, arrives in Hyderabad for postgraduate study carrying both academic ambition and the emotional legacy of a neglectful, at times abusive, single father. She becomes entangled with Vikram, a confident engineering student and campus "hero" known for defending women from other men. Their relationship begins with a kiss Vikram initiates without clear mutual consent; he publicizes the event immediately, effectively announcing her as "his girlfriend" before she has agreed to the label. What follows is a gradual tightening of control: Vikram monitors her friendships, belittles her literary and professional ambitions, withholds affection until she performs domestic care for him, pressures her toward conventional gender roles during a visit to his mother, and ultimately proposes marriage without meaningful consultation, dismissing her degree as impractical.

These scenes resonate with Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, whose protagonist Nora Helmer awakens from a marriage in which she has been treated as a doll, pet, and child by her husband Torvald. This article contends that *The Girlfriend* constitutes a modern, culturally specific reworking of Ibsen's feminist classic, while insisting on the historical and structural differences between them. Both narratives hinge on a crisis that exposes the hollowness of "protective" patriarchal love and catalyzes the heroine's rejection of a relational definition of self; but the mechanisms of control differ in kind and not only in degree – legal subordination and forged signatures in one case, digital surveillance, campus gossip, and reputational threat in the other. Attending to this difference, rather than flattening it into a simple "then and now" equivalence, is the organizing method of the analysis that follows.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on *A Doll's House* has moved through several stages. Early readings tended to treat Nora's departure as a matter of individual self-realization, in keeping with Ibsen's own occasional insistence that he wrote "more of humanity in general" than of women's rights specifically. Joan Templeton's *Ibsen's Women* contests this depoliticized reading directly, arguing that Nora's exit only makes sense as a rejection of the institutional and legal structures – coverture, the criminalization of a wife's independent financial action, the presumption of a husband's moral authority that produce her dependency in the first place. Elaine Showalter's gynocritical framework, developed primarily for the British novel, is relevant here for a different reason: it insists that women's self-definition be read against the specific literary and social conventions available to women writers and characters of a given period, rather than against a timeless standard of "liberation." Toril Moi's *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* complicates both positions further, situating Nora's transformation within Ibsen's broader dramaturgical break from idealist theater: Nora's awakening is not only a feminist event but a formal one, in which the well-made play's reliance on secrets and reversals is turned against the domestic ideology it typically serves.

Existing writing on *The Girlfriend*, by contrast, is almost entirely journalistic rather than scholarly, consisting of reviews published around the film's November 2025 release that praise its restraint and its refusal of the hypermasculine template it critiques. This is not a deficiency in the reviewers' judgment so much as a structural fact about a film seven months old at the time of writing: it has not yet accumulated an academic reception history comparable to Ibsen's. That asymmetry is itself worth stating plainly rather than working around. This article does not claim to close a long-standing gap in a mature field of Girlfriend scholarship, since no such field yet exists; it claims instead to open one, by establishing the terms: hegemonic masculinity, the eternal myth of femininity, public versus private patriarchy through which more sustained scholarly engagement with the film could proceed.

On the masculinity side of the comparison, Connell and Messerschmidt's reformulation of hegemonic masculinity is more useful here than Connell's earlier, more static model, precisely because it accounts for masculinities that are locally dominant (a campus "hero") without being dominant at the level of the whole society, a distinction that matters for a character like Vikram, whose authority is real within his college but not backed by law or family wealth in the way Torvald's is backed by his professional status. Judith Butler's account of gender as an iterated performance, rather than an expression of an inner essence, offers a way of describing Vikram's hypermasculinity as something assembled through repeated public acts: the fight, the public claiming of Bhooma, the reassertion of dominance after rejection rather than as a fixed trait the film simply illustrates. Bell Hooks's *The Will to Change* supplies the account of love this article uses to distinguish Vikram's and Torvald's behavior from genuine care: hooks argues that patriarchal masculinity substitutes control and provision for the vulnerability that care actually requires, which is precisely the substitution both men make and both heroines eventually refuse.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HYPERMASCULINITY, PERFORMANCE, AND THE ETERNAL MYTH OF FEMININITY

This study combines five theoretical resources: Beauvoir's account of woman as Other, Woolf's insistence on the material conditions of independence, Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, Connell and Messerschmidt's hegemonic masculinity, and Butler's performativity, with hooks's and Walby's work used to specify, respectively, the emotional and structural registers of control.

Hypermasculinity denotes an exaggerated adherence to traditional masculine norms: physical strength, emotional stoicism, dominance, and the control of women – often at the expense of vulnerability or reciprocity. In Indian cinematic and cultural contexts it frequently takes the form of the "mard" or alpha-protector archetype, who enforces boundaries through aggression, treats women as territory to be defended, and reads rejection as a threat to his own status. Read through Butler rather than through a trait-based model, Vikram's campus-hero persona is not simply who he is but what he continually re-performs: fighting perceived rivals, publicly claiming Bhooma, and reacting to the eventual breakup with rage and slut-shaming are iterations of the same performance under increasing pressure, not isolated lapses in an otherwise stable character.

Beauvoir's concept of the eternal myth of femininity, from *The Second Sex* (1949), describes how woman is constructed as the absolute Other to man's Subject, defined through him rather than in her own right. Myths of the "eternal feminine", angel or monster, self-sacrificing mother or castrating threat, contain female subjectivity by making any departure from idealization look like a fall into its opposite. In *The Girlfriend*, Vikram idealizes Bhooma during courtship as the submissive complement to his hypermasculine self, explicitly comparing her to his own mother; when she resists and asserts independent desire, she is recast as the "monster" – gold-digger, "loose woman", which triggers surveillance, public shaming, and threat. Bhooma's arc enacts Beauvoir's prescribed remedy: transcendence through projects of her own, achieved here through completed education, employment, travel, and writing.

Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) complements this by insisting that intellectual freedom requires economic independence and physical space, not romantic fulfillment. Mulvey's theory of the male gaze illuminates how patriarchal narrative positions women as objects to be looked at and possessed rather than as agents; Bhooma's transformation from an object of Vikram's approval into the subject of her own narrative, culminating in the book she writes, reverses this positioning within the film's own plot. Finally, Walby's distinction between private patriarchy (control exercised within an individual household, typically by a husband or father) and public patriarchy (control exercised through institutions, workplaces, and now digital and social networks) gives the historical comparison its sharpest edge: Torvald's authority over Nora is essentially private and legally backed, while Vikram's authority over Bhooma is public, informal, and reputational – sustained by campus gossip, group chats, and the threat of social exposure rather than by any legal claim on her.

IV. A NOTE ON METHOD AND SOURCES

Two evidentiary asymmetries bear directly on how the claims below should be read. First, *A Doll's House* exists as a fixed, heavily edited, and multiply translated dramatic text with a century and a half of textual scholarship behind it, while *The Girlfriend* is a recent commercial film without a published shooting script; the account of the film offered here is therefore built from the released cut and from published reviews and interviews rather than from a citable screenplay, and specific dialogue is paraphrased rather than quoted verbatim. Second, the Ibsen scholarship cited is substantial and long-settled, while scholarship on *The Girlfriend* is, as noted above, not yet a mature field. The comparative claims that follow should accordingly be read as an initial critical framework for the film rather than as a claim that the two works have been shown, by an established body of criticism, to belong to a single genealogy. Direct quotations from Ibsen are cited to the Michael Meyer translation used throughout; readers using a different translation should expect wording, though not the substance of Nora's position, to vary.

V. NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE AND RECEPTION OF *THE GIRLFRIEND*

Bhooma arrives in Hyderabad for her postgraduate studies in literature. Vikram pursues her with a charm inflected by presumption; the relationship begins with an unreciprocated kiss he immediately publicizes, establishing a claim to her before she has made one to him. Control escalates through the monitoring of her friendships, the belittling of her ambitions, pressure toward traditional domestic roles during a visit to his mother whose own constrained, deferential manner functions as both warning and mirror, and a unilateral marriage plan that dismisses her degree as beside the point. A pivotal sequence occurs when Bhooma meets Vikram's mother: framed before a mirror, the scene visually proposes Bhooma's possible future self, defined through a man and with her own desires erased. Her panic attack afterward marks the beginning of a bodily, pre-verbal recognition that something is wrong before she can articulate it in those terms.

Family conflict compounds this when Bhooma's father discovers Vikram in her room; the resulting confrontation leads to further alienation and, later, to her father's rejection of her as a "loose woman." After Bhooma ends the relationship, Vikram and his circle respond with threats, slut-shaming, physical intimidation, and the defacement of her door with language advertising her as a sex worker. Supported by Durga, initially a rival for Vikram's attention who becomes an ally through collaborative work on a college production, Bhooma confronts the aftermath of the relationship. At the college farewell, she publicly asserts that she will either find a partner who respects her or remain unmarried, and that Vikram's attempts at public shaming no longer control her. The epilogue shows her completing her degree, working at a pharmaceutical company, traveling, writing, and maintaining friendships – self-realization staged without a replacement romance as the marker of closure.

Reviewers in the Indian press were largely positive, praising Rashmika Mandanna's performance for its restraint and for rendering coercive control through accumulated discomfort rather than through a single dramatic incident. Balakrishna Ganeshan, writing in *The News Minute*, frames the film as a study of patriarchal control rather than a conventional romance; Vaashi Kairam, in *The Hollywood Reporter India*, similarly emphasizes its introspective, non-melodramatic register. Some reviewers noted uneven pacing and occasional over-explanation of the film's own thesis, but the critical consensus recognized its significance within a Telugu industry still reckoning with the legacy of films that aestheticized male rage.

VI. PATRIARCHAL CONTROL, HYPERMASCULINITY, AND THE EROSION OF SELF

The film's most precise contribution is its depiction of coercive control that does not require physical violence to be effective: the systematic narrowing of a partner's autonomy, social world, and self-regard, conducted under the appearance of care. Bhooma's visible discomfort when Vikram places an arm around her shoulders registers the truth of unwanted intimacy before she is able to name it. The unreciprocated, immediately publicized kiss establishes a pattern in which her body and her story are treated as available for his use; his silent treatment until she performs domestic care for him functions as a further form of leverage.

Vikram's promise to "take care of" her financially if she leaves her course, his assumption that she will relocate for his career, and his expectation of children and housework alongside any job she might keep, together describe the patriarchal bargain in its plainest form: material security offered in exchange for intellectual and economic independence. His early comparison of Bhooma to his own mother, initially framed as praise, retroactively reveals his template for an acceptable partner as nurturing, self-effacing, and secondary to his own ambitions. These dynamics do not originate with Vikram alone. Bhooma's father, himself controlling and emotionally dependent on his daughter, models a version of the same authority that Vikram later reproduces; when Bhooma ends the relationship, her father's cruelty compounds rather than counters the harm. The film thereby resists locating the abuse in one man's individual pathology, situating it instead within a wider socialization that teaches men to equate love with ownership and teaches women to measure their worth by relational utility.

VII. BHOOMA'S AWAKENING: FROM OBJECT OF CLAIM TO AUTHOR OF SELF

Bhooma's transformation unfolds gradually rather than in a single turn. The early scenes establish her as reserved and somewhat withdrawn, qualities the film presents as part of what makes her available to be claimed rather than courted. The mirror scene with Vikram's mother marks a hinge point, after which her subsequent panic attack functions as a bodily objection to continued self-erasure that precedes her conscious articulation of the problem. Her request for space is met with Vikram's insistence that he understands her needs better than she does, a small but telling assertion of interpretive authority over her own experience.

Female solidarity accelerates the awakening that follows. Durga's shift from rival to ally is not sentimentalized; it functions pragmatically, giving Bhooma external confirmation of perceptions that gaslighting had made her doubt. In the climactic public declaration at the farewell, Bhooma reclaims a voice that the relationship had suppressed, stating plainly that she felt cornered and that she does not require Vikram's approval to define her own future. Smashing her phone after her father's call symbolizes a rupture from the specific digital and social channels through which control had been exercised – the film's equivalent, in a networked register, of Nora's slammed door. The epilogue's emphasis on education, employment, travel, and writing stages a broadly Woolfian resolution, in which Bhooma secures both a literal and figurative room of her own.

VIII. ECHOES OF A DOLL'S HOUSE: STRUCTURAL AND THEMATIC PARALLELS

Ibsen's Nora Helmer performs the role of the charming, childlike wife: Torvald's "squirrel" and "skylark", throughout most of the play. She forges a signature to secure funds for her husband's medical treatment, an act the play reveals as criminal under the law that governs her precisely because she undertook it without her husband's authority. When the forgery is exposed, Torvald's first reaction is horror at the damage to his reputation rather than gratitude for what she risked on his behalf; his condemnation precedes any actual external threat. This precipitates Nora's recognition that she has never been treated as a full person, either by her husband or by the legal and social order that authorizes him. Her declaration that she has been "his doll-wife, just as at home [she] was papa's doll-child," and her subsequent departure through a door she closes behind her, remain among the most cited feminist gestures in modern drama.

The structural parallels with Bhooma's story are close but not exact. Both women inhabit relationships that infantilize them under the sign of protection: Torvald polices Nora's spending, diet, and even her rehearsal of the tarantella for his benefit; Vikram polices Bhooma's friendships, appearance, and the terms on which she is permitted to feed or be fed. Both men experience love as possession: Torvald refers to Nora as his "most precious possession"; and Vikram claims Bhooma publicly before securing her agreement without discussion that her career will subordinate itself to his. In both cases, crisis exposes the fragility of an arrangement that had depended on the woman's compliance remaining unquestioned: Nora's forgery and Torvald's self-interested response; Bhooma's resistance to an unconsulted marriage plan and Vikram's retaliatory shaming and threats.

The differences, however, are not merely cosmetic. Ibsen's critique targets the legal and economic architecture of Victorian marriage; Nora's dependency is structural in the strict sense that she cannot, as a legal matter, act financially without her husband's implication. Bhooma possesses nominal independence as a graduate student with her own income prospects, so her confinement operates instead through emotional dependency, campus reputation, and internalized script through what Walby would classify as public rather than private patriarchy. This shift explains why *The Girlfriend* can depict forms of control unavailable to Ibsen: gaslighting framed as concern for her stability, surveillance conducted through routine messaging, and public shaming staged through gossip and the physical defacement of her door rather than through a legal document. Where Nora's awakening culminates in leaving a household, Bhooma's awakening culminates in leaving a script: the assumption, shared by Vikram, her father, and her college's rumor economy alike, that her value is relational rather than her own.

Both endings withhold the conventional romantic resolution. Nora does not stay for the children's sake or for social approval; Bhooma's epilogue conspicuously does not supply a replacement partner, centering instead on the book she writes and the friendships she keeps. In both cases the departure is framed as a precondition for personhood rather than as selfishness. Vikram's dominance is more overtly aggressive than Torvald's genteel paternalism, consistent with the difference between a legally sanctioned authority that rarely needs to raise its voice and an informally sanctioned one that must keep re-asserting itself publicly to remain credible, but the underlying claim, that love without respect for the other's autonomy is a refined form of domination, holds across both.

IX. DISCUSSION: BEAUVOIR, WOOLF, AND THE LIMITS OF THE COMPARISON

Beauvoir's dictum that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" describes Bhooma's positioning as Vikram's Other with some precision: idealized as compliant femininity during courtship, she is recast as monstrous the moment she asserts an independent desire, and the speed of that recasting is itself the evidence of the myth's coercive function rather than of any change in her actual conduct. Woolf's insistence on financial independence and physical space finds a literal echo in Bhooma's epilogue, but the film's more interesting achievement is dramatizing the psychological cost of lacking that space beforehand, rather than simply rewarding her with it at the end.

It is worth being explicit about what this comparison does and does not establish. It does not claim that Ravindran consciously adapted Ibsen, and no interview evidence cited here supports direct influence; the claim is rather that both works organize a common feminist problem – protective love as a vehicle for control – through structurally comparable plots, and that reading them together clarifies the historically specific mechanisms (legal dependency then, networked reputation now) through which that problem is enforced. Nor does the comparison suggest that Indian and Victorian patriarchal norms are equivalent; the article has tried throughout to mark where Walby's private/public distinction, rather than a flat parallel, better accounts for the difference. A fuller account would also engage Indian feminist scholarship on family honor and campus culture more directly than space here allows, and would benefit from audience-reception data on how the film's Telugu viewers actually understood its politics, which lies outside the textual method used in this article.

X. CONCLUSION

Read together, *The Girlfriend* and *A Doll's House* show both the persistence and the mutability of patriarchal control across historical periods and cultural contexts. Nora Helmer and Bhooma Devi undergo parallel processes of awakening in which each comes to recognize the unequal foundation of a relationship she had been taught to read as protective, and each converts that recognition into a departure – from a household in one case, from a script in the other – that the respective texts frame as a precondition for personhood rather than an act of selfishness. What changes between the two is not the presence of patriarchal authority but its instrument: legal and economic dependency in Ibsen, and networked reputational control in Ravindran. Identifying that shift, using Walby's public/private distinction alongside Beauvoir's, Woolf's, Butler's, and hooks's accounts of gendered selfhood, is this article's main contribution, offered as a starting framework for further, more empirically grounded work on a film that has not yet had time to accumulate its own scholarly literature.

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