

Lyric

A Doll's HOUSE

By **HENRIK IBSEN**

In a new adaptation by **TANIKA GUPTA**

Directed by **RACHEL O'RIORDAN**

**EDUCATION PACK
FOR ENGLISH A-LEVEL AND
DRAMA GCSE STUDENTS**

OVERVIEW AND CONTENTS

The Lyric Hammersmith Theatre education department are committed to deepening and nurturing young people's understanding of theatre and the arts. We aim to raise the cultural aspirations of all young people and make theatre accessible to all. We work closely with teachers and students to ensure that our offer fulfils their needs and desires. With this in mind this education pack is designed for teachers of A-level English and Drama GCSE students. From September 2021 Tanika Gupta's *A Doll's House* will be a part of the Pearson Edexcel GCSE Drama set texts. You will find additional resources to support the study for Edexcel Component 3 Theatre Makers in Practice (Section A) on our website.

This pack is written from a theatre maker's perspective, including photos of the rehearsal room and production. We are keen to draw your attention to the section on page 10 which outlines tensions and questions the creative team identified within the text and which they then explored onstage. We hope that these provocations stimulate robust student discussion on identity, gender politics and colonialism. You will also find lengthy extracts from the script at the back of the pack and a selection of drama exercises for use in the classroom.



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SYNOPSIS

Act 1: Sc 1

Calcutta, 1879, *A Doll's House* opens on Christmas Eve. Niru Helmer enters carrying packages. Tom Helmer, Niru's husband, greets her playfully but then scolds her for spending too much money. Their conversation reveals that they have had to be careful with money for many years, but that Tom has recently obtained a promotion at the Tax Office and this will now afford them a more comfortable lifestyle.

Act 1: Sc 2

Uma, the maid, announces that their friend, Dr Rank, has come to visit. At the same time, another visitor has arrived, this one unknown. To Niru's surprise, Krishna Lahiri (a former school friend) arrives. The two have not seen each other for years, but Niru mentions that she heard that Mrs Lahiri's husband had recently died. Mrs Lahiri tells Niru that when her husband died, she was left with no money and no children. Niru tells Mrs Lahiri about her first year of marriage to Tom. She explains that they were very poor and both had to work long hours. When Tom suddenly became sick, she adds, they had to travel to Darjeeling so that he could recover. Niru inquires further about Mrs Lahiri's life. She hears that Mrs Lahiri's mother has passed away and that her brothers are too old to need her. Mrs Lahiri hopes that Tom may be able to help her obtain employment. Niru promises to speak to Tom.

Act 1: Sc 3

Tom and Dr Rank are in the study alone. Dr Rank is reading 'The Bengali' which prompts a discussion about Indian nationalism. They debate the purpose of the British rule in India and the negative impact it is having on the Indian population. They also discuss Tom's marriage to Niru and the scandal it has caused.

Act 1: Sc 4

Niru and Mrs Lahiri sit eating and, with a little probing, Niru reveals her secret that – without Tom's knowledge, Niru illegally borrowed money for the Darjeeling trip and told him that the money had come from her father. Niru reveals that she has worked for years to save in secret, slowly repaying the debt, and that soon it will be fully repaid. Uma, announces a new visitor, Das (a low-level clerk at the Tax Office) and he proceeds into Tom's study. Niru and Mrs Lahiri react uneasily to Das' presence.

Act 1: Sc 5

Niru and Mrs Lahiri admire the house. Dr Rank comes out of the study and says Das is 'a nasty specimen'. Tom enters, having seen Das out, and says that he can probably hire Mrs. Lahiri at the Tax Office. Dr Rank, Tom, and Mrs Lahiri then depart, leaving Niru by herself.

Act 1: Sc 6

Niru plays hide and seek with her children until she notices Das' presence in the courtyard. The two talk, and Das is revealed to be the source of Niru's secret loan. He states that Tom wants to fire him from his position at the Tax Office and rages against the British rule in India. He asks Niru to use her influence to ensure that his position remains safe. When she refuses, Das points out that he has a contract that contains Niru's forgery of her father's signature. Das blackmails Niru, threatening to reveal her crime and to bring shame and disgrace on both Niru and her husband if she does not prevent Tom from firing him. Das leaves, and when Tom returns, Niru tries to convince him not to fire Das, but Tom will hear nothing of it. He declares Das an immoral man.

**Act 2: Sc 1**

Christmas Day – Niru is alone and filled with anxiety. Mrs Lahiri arrives and helps sew Niru's Kathak costume for the party. Niru tells Mrs Lahiri that Dr Rank has a terrible illness. Niru's suspicious behaviour leads Mrs. Lahiri to guess that Dr Rank is the source of Niru's loan. Niru denies it and refuses to reveal the source of her distress. Tom arrives, and Niru again begs him to keep Das employed at the Tax Office, but again Tom refuses and explains that it is Das' over familiar attitude and low class that he despises. Tom and Niru argue until Tom sends the Uma to deliver Das' letter of dismissal. Tom leaves.

Act 2: Sc 2

Dr Rank arrives and tells Niru that he knows he is close to death. Dr Rank then reveals to Niru that he is in love with her. Uma enters and tells Niru that Das is here to see her. Dr Rank leaves reluctantly and Das enters demanding an explanation for his dismissal. He has changed the terms of the blackmail: he now insists that Niru secures him a job at the Tax Office at an even higher position. He then puts a letter detailing Niru's debt and forgery in the Helmers' letterbox. In a panic, Niru tells Mrs Lahiri everything, and Mrs Lahiri instructs Niru to delay Tom from opening the letter as long as possible while she goes to speak with Das. Niru manages to make Tom promise not to open his mail until after she performs at the party. Mrs Lahiri soon returns and says that she has left Das a note but that he will be gone until the following evening. Niru rushes off to get changed into her costume.

INTERVAL

Act 2: Sc 3

A percussionist, Master Ji, plays whilst Niru rehearses her Kathak dance in the courtyard. In her agitated emotional state, she dances wildly and violently, displeasing Tom.

Act 3: Sc 1

The next night, as the costume party takes place, Das meets Mrs Lahiri at the Helmers' house. Their conversation reveals that the two had once been deeply in love, but Mrs Lahiri left Das for a wealthier man. She tells Das she wishes to be with him and care for his children. Das is overjoyed and says he will demand his letter back before Tom can read it and learn Niru's secret. Mrs Lahiri, however, insists he leave the letter, because she believes both Tom and Niru will be better off once the truth has been revealed.

Act 3: Sc 3

Niru and Tom enter, back from the party. Tom tells Mrs Lahiri about Niru's dancing and how beautiful she looked. Mrs Lahiri leaves for bed. Dr Rank, who was also at the party and has come to say goodnight, and promptly interrupts Tom's advances on Niru. After Dr Rank leaves, Tom finds in his letterbox two of Dr Rank's visiting cards, each with a black cross above the name. Niru knows Dr Rank's cards constitute his announcement that he will soon die, and she tells Tom this. She then insists that Tom read Das' letter. Tom reads the letter and is outraged. He calls Niru a hypocrite and a liar and says that she has ruined his happiness. Uma then brings in another letter. Tom opens it and discovers that Das has returned Niru's contract (which contains the forged signature). Overjoyed, Tom attempts to dismiss his past insults, but his harsh words have triggered something in Niru.

Act 3: Sc 3

Later that night Niru waters her banana tree. Tom emerges and they talk. Niru declares that despite their eight years of marriage, they do not understand one another. Tom, Niru asserts, has treated her like a 'doll' to be played with and manipulated. She decides to leave Tom, declaring that she must make sense of herself and everything around her. She hands over the house keys, throws open the door and walks out.



THE TEXT

A Doll's House

By Henrik Ibsen

A new adaptation by Tanika Gupta

Henrik Ibsen (b.1828 – d.1906)

Henrik Johan Ibsen (20 March 1828 – 23 May 1906) was a Norwegian playwright, director and poet. As one of the founders of modernism¹ in theatre, Ibsen is often referred to as 'the father of realism²' and one of the most influential playwrights of his time. His major works include *Peer Gynt*, *An Enemy of the People*, *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts* and *The Wild Duck*. He is the most frequently performed dramatist in the world after Shakespeare, and by the early 20th century *A Doll's House* became the world's most performed play. Several of his dramas were considered scandalous at the time as European theatre was expected to model strict morals of family life and propriety and Ibsen made a point of challenging this. Ibsen saw this play as a 'modern tragedy' – 'a woman cannot be herself in modern society', he argued, since it is 'an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint'.

Tanika Gupta (b.1963)

Over the past 20 years Tanika Gupta has written over 20 stage plays that have been produced in major theatres across the UK. Born in London the year after her parents arrived from Calcutta, Gupta's earliest memories are of performing dance dramas by Rabindranath Tagore with her parent's cultural group. After graduating from Oxford University, Tanika was employed as a community worker and in an Asian women's refuge for several years before turning to writing full time.

'Gender politics through the lens of British Colonialism'³

In this new adaptation of *A Doll's House*, Gupta changes the setting to Calcutta in 1879, where 'Nora', now Niru, is an Indian woman married to 'Torvald', now Tom, an English man working for the British colonial administration. This version of *A Doll's House* takes a fresh look at the play shining a light on British colonial history and race relations as well as gender politics and identity.



1. **Modernism**: a movement in the arts that deliberately moved away from classical and traditional forms

2. **Realism**: theatre with a focus on 'real life' – about real people in everyday situations and common problems

3. **Colonialism**: taking political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it

OUR VISION

A Doll's House

By Henrik Ibsen

A new adaptation by Tanika Gupta

Director Rachel O'Riordan

My first play as Artistic Director is a bold new version of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* by the award-winning West-London born Tanika Gupta. This is an immediate and modern adaptation of Ibsen's classic which examines key themes of patriarchy, gender politics and identity (individual and national) through the prism of British colonialism.

To keep the investigation of these issues immediate and relevant it is vital that the characters/actors are constantly pursuing their objectives – always reactive and proactive within each scene. Thus moving

our adaptation away from a staid period piece to a modern re-telling and allowing the universal themes at the heart of the text to resonate. An aspect of the Lyric's work is rooted in reimagining classic texts; putting the interpretation of them in the hands of artists (writers, directors and creatives) whose voice brings new perspective. You will see my vision for this piece realised in the costume, set, lighting and music as we collaborate to create a world which echoes the past but remains fundamentally contemporary. For example, precisely focused lighting and musical motifs transports the action without the need for complex scene changes. In this way we are able to keep the performance flowing seamlessly from scene to scene.

Set and costume designer Lily Arnold

The action takes place on one single unchanging set, rather than a series of Naturalistic Victorian interiors. Whilst the design has a timeless quality we rely upon the costumes to establish the time period and location. The stage is framed by the Lyric's highly decorative Victorian proscenium arch⁴ (designed by Frank Matcham in 1895) and the set's simplicity counterbalances the ornate auditorium. The height of the on-stage balcony deliberately matches the circle in the auditorium and in this way the audience become implicated in the action.

Composer Arun Ghosh

The score is inspired by Bengali traditional melodies, scales and instrumentation. There is a rich repertoire of evocative period music to draw on in the composition process. Ghosh's own cultural heritage is reflected in the score as he blends Bengali and Western sounds. The music will be played live off stage, and occasionally on-stage, where he will interact with the actors as a magical presence. Often these scenes will mark the passing of time and the transition between the Naturalistic and Expressionistic⁵ worlds. Scenes are underscored with field recordings of the streets of Calcutta and soundscapes will be used to heighten tension.



4. **Proscenium arch**: an arch framing the opening between the stage and the auditorium

5. **Expressionism**: an creative movement which presents a subjective view of the world for emotional effect to evoke moods or ideas



CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

The seeds of independence

1879 in Calcutta was a pivotal moment in the struggle for Indian independence from the British Raj. India was still reeling from The Great Famine (1876–1878) which caused the death of 5.5 million Indians. The famine was due to a number of factors including intense drought, crop failure and the British government's continued export of grain to England (320,000 tons over two years) in the face of the starving population. The Great Famine had a lasting political impact as some British administrators were deeply unsettled by the official response to the famine. In 1879, rebellious voices against the British Crown's direct control were growing and distinguished Indians were joined by key colonialists to provoke and publicise Indian nationalist thinking. India and her population had suffered appalling exploitation for over one hundred years since the arrival of The East India Company⁶ (1600–1858) and there was now an increasing number of British who were beginning to question the role and purpose of the British Empire in India.

Dr Rank: We behave like arrogant conquerors. We annex lands, tax the poor and ship the money back to England. What are we doing here?

How is this context reflected in the play?

Gupta's clearest intervention in Ibsen's original text takes the form of a debate between Tom Helmer and Dr Rank (Act 1: Sc 3) in which Rank states his disgust at the British colonialist treatment of its Indian subjects. He criticises the Empire's cruelty and applauds political leader and founder of 'The Bengali' newspaper, Surendranath Banerjee. Banerjee was nicknamed 'Surrender not Banerjee' by the British due to his popular speeches condemning racial discrimination by British officials and his promotion of a united India. In 1883, Banerjee heralded the birth of The Indian National Congress, and, in turn, influenced the next generation of Indian nationalists.

6. **East India Company:** a private company granted a trade monopoly in the East Indies by Elizabeth I, which it enforced by violence

The White male gaze

Until the last decades of the East India Company (1600–1858), most British men in India spent part of their careers living with at least one Indian or Eurasian woman. A member of the administration was as likely to have a 'bibi' or native mistress as a housekeeper in Calcutta, though the 'bibi' was very much more than a mistress. Richard Burton, who spent seven years as an officer in India in the 1840s, praised his first mistress as a nurse, a housekeeper and a teacher 'not only [of] Hindostani grammar, but [the] ways of native life' too; furthermore she knew how to keep 'the servants in order'. In later years he recalled that the erotic skills of Indian women were so superior to those of British men that no 'bibi' had ever been able to truly love her master but that she saw it was her duty to service his needs. In this era it was acceptable for women from Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African cultures to be objectified. These 'exotic' women were depicted in the visual arts and in literature, from a masculine, heterosexual perspective, presenting and representing them as rare sexual objects for the pleasure of the white male viewer. Their 'otherness' was enforced as they were dressed up to dance, sing, entertain and please their colonial masters however they were bid.

How is this context reflected in the play?

The British government shut down the East India Company in 1858 and the Raj was established. Clear rules came into being regarding marriage for British men serving in India. Marriage to an Indian woman was scandalous and marriage to Anglo-Indians heavily frowned upon. You could argue that Tom Helmer's marriage to Niru is a courageous act of defiance, challenging racial prejudices and promoting integration and cultural understanding. But does his objectification and distorted vision of her as his 'timid Indian Princess' not indicate that he is in fact excited by breaking social codes and that their relationship fulfils his own Orientalist fantasy?

TOM: *Admit it Niru, you are a very pretty but expensive pet!*





TENSIONS AND QUESTIONS

Gutpa's adaptation of *A Doll's House* raises many complex questions about race, gender politics, power, class and relationships in the nineteenth century. The statements below outline a few of the provocations the creative team identified in the rehearsal process. Use these points to trigger discussion and then set your students the task of identifying moments in which these tensions are explored in the script. Ask how the acting and design elements (set, costume, lighting and music/sound design) combine to communicate these ideas to the audience?

Men will always objectify women regardless of class or race

- Does Das objectify Mrs Lahiri? If not why?
- Does Tom objectify Uma? If not why?
- How does Dr Rank's proclamation change his relationship with Niru?
- Will Niru ever be able to escape her self-image as a doll?

Tom is a progressive not an orientalist

- Does Tom love Niru for who she is or because she is different?
- What has Tom risked in marrying her?
- Does Tom's encouragement of her dancing really celebrate her culture?
- Are Tom's opinions just a product of the era?

Marriage is an act of colonialism

- Are all married women oppressed?
- In marriage, does the woman automatically give up her true identity?
- What are wives without husbands to rule, regulate and possess them?
- Is a wife her husband's slave?

Niru represents India

- How does her relationship with Tom mirror India's relationship with the Raj?
- What impact does Mrs Lahiri have on Niru?
- How does Niru's identity shift throughout the play?
- What does her departure symbolise?



THEMES AND SYMBOLS

The natural world is ever-present. Tom refers to Niru as his 'little squirrel' and 'skylark'. She is kept caged within the home and is unable to leave it without a chaperone. Niru listens intently to the birds and monkeys in the trees and to the sounds of the street beyond. We watch her lovingly tend her banana plant and this act becomes symbolic of her final transformation and escape. Like the large central tree, Niru is reaching towards the sunlight; she is a natural force and cannot be contained. As her psychological struggle intensifies so does the presence of the natural world.

NIRU is paralysed for a moment. The sound of the cicadas becoming deafening and the owl hooting loudly.

Interrogation and voyeurism are key themes of this interpretation. With multiple entrances, exits and a balcony level above, characters are able to secretly overhear and observe each other. Niru is under constant surveillance by Tom, Dr Rank and Das. The set design deliberately implicates the audience as we passively watch Niru undergo manipulation and humiliation at the hands of her husband.

The Kathak dance is a pivotal moment in the play. As Niru prepares to perform this ritual temple dance for a party of British colonialists she is objectified and sexualised by Tom. The dance is not only symbolic of his orientalist fantasy of Niru and the power imbalance in their relationship, but it also embodies her fraught emotional state, loss of control and ultimately her loss of identity.

NIRU looks afraid, dancing desperately and falteringly.

REHEARSAL DIARY

On day one we, the full company (including director, Rachel O’Riordan, the creative team, the actors, our stage managers and Lyric staff), all gathered in RR2 (the largest rehearsal room at the Lyric) for the ‘meet and greet’. We then held a read-through, where the cast read Tanika Gupta’s text aloud. Following this director, Rachel O’Riordan, and designer, Lily Arnold, talked us through the design and showed the model-box (a fully realised 1:25 scale model of the set – see page 13). This provided an opportunity for the creative team to share their ideas of what the world of the play will look and feel like. In the afternoon we gathered around a table where we discussed all aspects of the text. We covered a huge amount of ground and we were all required to do a large amount of research that week into British colonial India circa 1879. For example, we investigated how a mixed race marriage between an English man and an Indian woman would be viewed by society and what impact this might have had on their relationship. In week two, we were joined around



the table by writer Tanika Gupta. This gave Rachel and the actors a wonderful opportunity to ask questions, and address any queries they had about the language used in the play. It also gave Tanika a chance to make minor revisions in direct response to what she saw and heard in rehearsals. By the middle of the week we moved from the safety of our table to rehearsing up on our feet in the space. A rehearsal set had been constructed in the room and the cast began working through the play scene by scene. Musician Arun Ghosh worked alongside the actors throughout, improvising music for transitions and experimenting with instrumentation for voicing the different characters. In this week we also began exploring the Expressionistic aspects of the play and experimenting with ways of integrating this into the Naturalistic narrative.

SET DESIGN

Lily Arnold's design is a pared back and contemporary, not a picture book representation of a colonial household. Installing a decorative balcony could lead the audience to expect period furniture. Instead, Arnold relies on upon the other design elements and the acting to establish the time period, mood and atmosphere. The architecture and the distressed paint work (in rich saffron colours) clearly establishes the location on the Indian sub-continent, however, the space and environment remain timeless.

The central door is integral to the design. In the final scene Niru departs through it and this fundamentally change the mood and atmosphere of the space. Lily Arnold has designed an environment with a sense of permanence as a counterpoint to Niru's dramatic exit. Even more so in this post-colonial adaptation of the text, the symbolism of Niru's parting is heavily laden with meaning. Therefore, deciding where the door is positioned, what is seen, heard and how her journey through this boundary is marked through lights, sound and music, was one of the first considerations in the design process.



The courtyard, enclosed by a balcony, is typical of South Asian homes. Interiors were kept cool by the air flow an open roof would provide and red oxide flooring was (and still is) a common feature. The space is deliberately open and yet also enclosed. It is vital to our interpretation of *A Doll's House* to create a space which is both private and public; a set which references both Indian architecture of the era and colonial design principals. Raised walkways were a feature of Victorian prisons and Arnold's design echoes this architecture to emphasise the voyeuristic nature of the text and implicate the audience in the action.

The tree provides poetic balance to the strict structure of the courtyard. With its branches sitting just beneath the roof line it is a symbol of Niru's longing to escape her situation and ultimately her marriage. Inspiration for this design was taken from 'Edwardian cases' (the first terrariums) of the era. Similar in scale to a doll's house these ornate miniature greenhouses were used to transport exotic plants back to England from the colonies.

COSTUME DESIGN

Niru wears a number of saris throughout the play. At the start she is seen in sophisticated old golds, elegant and refined period colours. The sari silk is rustic, simply patterned and sometimes shot through. Niru wears a jama (blouse) to cover her shoulders. Her chaddar (shawl) is a brilliant Royal blue which stands out against the muted tones. At the end of the play she departs home in a modest plain cotton sari.

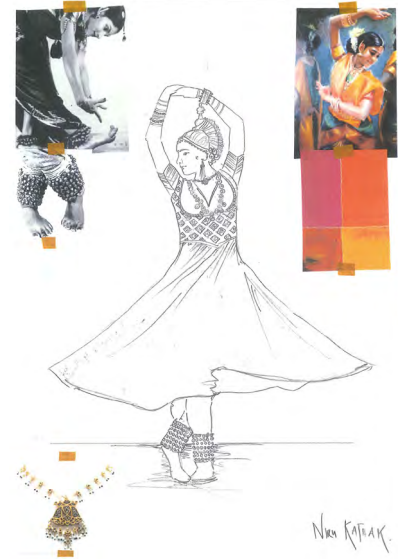
The British Raj brought about a change in the way saris were draped as the traditional way of draping sari without blouse was seen as too revealing and inappropriate. Influenced by Victorian English fashion Bengali women started wearing a sari with a blouse or an undershirt (jama) and petticoat (shaya).

Niru's Kathak costume consists of a long and full embroidered skirt with a contrasting choli or blouse and an urhni or scarf. Colours are rich red with flashes of gold. Traditional gold jewellery adorn her hair, neck and hands. Musical anklets called ghunghru made of leather straps with small metallic bells attached are wrapped around her ankles to produce rhythmic sound while she performs the complex footwork of the Kathak dance.

Tom and Dr Rank's costumes are typical of Victorian men's fashion of the era. Despite the heat and humidity many men wore three piece suits made from thick wool. Dr Rank is slightly more relaxed in his appearance and wears softer fabrics and muted colours. Whereas Tom is seen in the customary black. Both men wear formal evening wear to the party which consists of white bow tie and tails with dress pants and patent shoes.

The British living in the Indian sub-continent continued to wear the same clothes and attire as worn in England. They may have adapted the fabrics slightly wearing cooler cottons and linens, but, on the most part they upheld the fashions as a point of principal.

Das and Mrs Lahiri wear traditional Indian garments appropriate for their caste and stature within society. Mrs Lahiri is a Hindu widower and is not from the city. She must remain in mourning and so wears a customary white cotton sari and jama (or blouse) and covers her head. Das wears similar lightweight fabrics, however, his appearance is smarter as he is a clerk within the British colonial administration. He wears Indian garments a Dhoti (a rectangular piece of unstitched cloth, wrapped around the waist and legs then knotted) and a Punjabi (a long collarless jacket/tunic with buttons).



LIGHTING AND SOUND

Lighting by Kevin Treacy

The play takes place over three consecutive days in December, a cooler time of year but nonetheless sunny. The set design and chronological order of the play lends itself to naturalistic lighting. We move the lights very slowly during the performance flying them in the fly tower above the stage to indicate the gradual passing of time as shadows lengthen and the sun loses its intensity. This deliberately heightens the mood and atmosphere at times of tension.

UMA exits. The light fades a little as the sun sets. NIRU paces anxiously

Lights are focussed down through the canopy and we use a gobo⁷ to intensify the presence of the tree above the roofline. Light spills through both up-stage and down-stage doorways indicating the rooms off-stage, however, to enhance the moment Niru throws open the large door, no light is seen through the three centre-stage windows throughout. As she leaves we flood the stage with directional light, creating a silhouette of her dramatic exit

Music by Arun Ghosh

The instrumentation is key to creating the soundworld for *A Doll's House*. Ghosh uses the harmonium (right) (brought to India by the British), the dotara (Bengali lute), the bass lute and the dholak drum. Ghosh is keen for the play to resonate beyond the time period in which it is set. To do this these traditional instruments are heard above an atmospheric sound-bed which gives the music an epic feel. Ghosh's main expressive instrument is the clarinet and he uses this to voice Niru's inner thoughts and feelings. He is occasionally seen onstage alongside Niru in her most introspective moments and has developed musical motifs which draw the audience into her psychological state. Another means by which Ghosh influences the shifting mood of the play is through use of Indian raags (a melodic framework for improvisation akin to a melodic mode). Moving from one raag to another – from a major key to a minor key – emphasises key plot points and pivotal moments. Listen here for more insight into the composition process.



[Interview with Arun Ghosh](#)

7. Gobo: a metal plate used in front of a spotlight to project a shape (i.e. leaves).

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHY



Act 1: Sc 1



Act 1: Sc 1



Act 1: Sc 4



Act 2: Sc 2



Act 2: Sc 2



Act 3: Sc 1



Act 3: Sc 2



Act 3: Sc 2

EXTRACTS AND EXERCISES

Explore the issues and themes at the heart of our interpretation of *A Doll's House* using the play extracts and suggested activities below. All extracts are provided at the back of this pack.

Exercise 1: Context

(Whole class) Extract 1 Act 1:Sc 3

- Read through this scene to analyse the socio-cultural political context to this interpretation of *A Doll's House*.
- Draw up a list of the arguments raised for/against the British Raj.
- Set a homework task to research further points then, next session, divide the class in two and chair a debate.
- At the conclusion ask the group why they believe Gupta chose to adapt Ibsen's original text. What is her objective?

Exercise 2: Power play

(Pairs 20–30mins) Extract 2 Act 1:Sc 6

- Pairs read marking moments where their character's status changes.
- Give each pupil a chair/staging. Select a section of text to use. Step up on to chair/staging to elevate status. Step down to lower it. Play the scene again with this added instruction. Where are the crunch points in the scene? How does the power shift and why?
- Re-play finding alternative naturalistic ways of showing the power shift.

Exercise 3: Tom's outburst

(Whole class 20mins) Extract 3 Act 3:Sc 2

- Select one pupil to play Niru. Number and divide up Tom's lines between the rest of the class (split his lines to keep them punchy).
- With Niru in the middle, the class circled around her, play the scene.
- Discuss and repeat. Decide how Tom's argument should ebb and flow. How does Niru respond? How does she survive his attack?
- Play with gender. Swap in a male student for Niru – have female students speak Tom's lines.

Exercise 4: Niru's response

(Pairs 30mins) Extracts 3 & 4 Act 3:Sc 2

- If possible, pairs play this scene immediately after completing exercise 3.
- This is Niru's response to Tom's tirade. Is her approach different? How?
- Whole class analysis of her argument and what it tells us about her.
- Pairs then revisit extract 3 and replay it naturalistically with the aim to pin-point the moment Niru decides to leave. Though she doesn't speak very much she is listening intently and reacting throughout. Investigate.



CREDITS AND RESOURCES

Cast (alphabetical order)

Tom Helmer	Elliot Cowan
Masherji	Arun Ghosh
Uma	Arinder Sadhra
Dr Rank	Colin Tierney
Mrs Lahiri	Tripti Tripuraneni
Niru	Anjana Vasan
Kashik Das	Assad Zaman

Creative Team

Adapted by	Tanika Gupta
Directed by	Rachel O’Riordan
Design by	Lily Arnold
Lighting Design by	Kevin Treacy
Sound Design by	Gregory Clarke
Composition & Live Music by	Arun Ghosh
Choreography by	Guari Sharma
Dialect by	Edda Sharpe
Associate Choreographer	Shivani Sethia
Casting by	Stuart Burt CDG
Assistant Director	Anthony Hoskyns

Additional resources

Play text

A Doll’s House: Oberon Modern Plays
Tanika Gupta (author), Henrik Ibsen
ISBN: 9781786829900 Publisher: Bloomsbury Publishing
Available to buy [here](#)

Soundcloud

[Interview with Arun Ghosh](#)

Websites/articles

[What is Colonialism?](#)
[History KS3/GCSE: Empire](#)
[The British Empire 1815–1914](#)

Videos

[How does Colonialism shape the world we live in | The Stream](#)

Literature

Forster. E M., (1924) ‘*A passage to India*’, England, Edward Arnold
Shelley, P E., (1820) ‘*To a skylark: Prometheus Unbound*’, London, Charles & James Collier

Critical thinking

[Byatt, A S., \(2009\) ‘Blaming Nora’ \[Accessed: 6/8/2019\]](#)
Said, E W., (1978) ‘*Orientalism*’, New York, Pantheon Books

This education pack was created by Jessica Rae Drader, Producer (Education) at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre. For more information on our education work and to download, other teaching resources please visit lyric.co.uk/young-lyric/education/

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English...the girders for every bridge, the track for every mile of railway was carried here by ships from England.

DR RANK

Bannerjee claims we have brought slavery, famine, prison, battle and an undermining of the Indian psyche. He says that the railways have been built to transport troops around the country to quell rebellions and to transport food out of productive regions for export.

TOM looks disturbed

TOM

And you agree with him?

DR RANK

He puts his arguments across in a very convincing way. He says right here, that mortality rates amongst Indians are highest along the British rail lines. There's famine out there – Indians are dying in their thousands Tom.

TOM

We unified India. Without us...

DR RANK

Yes, yes. Without us, India as a nation wouldn't exist.

TOM

Some of the excesses of our predecessors are regretful to say the least. But now that we are headed by her Majesty as the Empress of India, order has been restored.

DR RANK

Pah! Empress! That was just Disraeli trying to keep the old woman happy and himself in a job. What's the point of having an Empire if you never step foot in it?

TOM

(Laughs) Her Majesty enjoys the glamour of the title.

DR RANK

I do worry that some of our race out here think they're Gods.

TOM

Ah – there I concur with you. One of the last cases I dealt with as a lawyer was defending 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

He got off didn't he?

TOM

Free as a bird. Thanks to my counsel. Gave me tortured nights – I had to come to you for a sleeping draught.

DR RANK I remember. The death of an Indian at British hands is always an 'accident'.

TOM Saw the man at the Club last week, barking at some poor *Bearer* there.

DR RANK He'll do it again. Those types see Indians as nothing more than animals, as their slaves.

TOM You should see the way some of them look at my beautiful wife. As if she's subhuman! I don't understand how they can't see what I see.

DR RANK I see it too.
And her father was a delightful man.

TOM Yes, he was. Major Arthur actually said to me 'Keep the woman as a concubine, but why marry her?'

DR RANK (*Angry*) You should have punched him.

TOM It took every fibre in my body not to.

DR RANK Next time I see him at the Club, I will punch him.

TOM (*Laughs*) You? Now that I'd like to see.

RANK laughs too

- *Bearer – (especially in India) an Indian boy or man employed as a personal or household servant.*

DR RANK If you ask me Tom, it's the English that need civilizing. Some of those who come out here are barely educated mercenaries and the power goes to their heads. Start lording it over everyone, putting on airs and graces as if it were their God given right to rule.

TOM Inferior blood lines.

DR RANK This country is an incredible place. The history, the sights and sounds, the religion – so complicated and vast. They were building palaces in this country when we were all painted with woad and virtually living in caves.

TOM Honestly Edward!

DR RANK What?

TOM

I worry about you.

DR RANK

Why?

TOM

Sometimes I think you've gone completely native. We have a job to do here and we must get on with it.

DR RANK

What job Tom? That's what I keep asking myself. We behave like arrogant conquerors. We annex lands, tax the poor and ship the money back to England. What are we doing here?

TOM

Making England great.

DR RANK

And losing our humanity along the way?

TOM

All I know is that I believe in fair play and justice and that is always how I conduct myself. And you should be careful. I've heard you spouting your anti-English theories in the club. It could get you in to trouble.

DR RANK

Nobody takes any notice of what I say.

the dirt with all my fellow countrymen. All of us beholden to the patronage of the white man who plunders our country.

NIRU

It is not in my power to help you.

DAS

You will have to

NIRU

You're going to tell my husband I owe you money?

DAS

You leave me no alternative.

NIRU

(Choked) No! You can't do that. That would be a disaster! You would make things horribly unpleasant for me.

DAS

Only unpleasant?

NIRU

Do it then. I don't care. You'll come out looking worse for wear. My husband will see what an evil man you are. And then you will certainly not keep your job.

DAS

I asked you if it was just unpleasantness at home you were afraid of? Let me remind you of a few details. When your husband was ill you came to me to borrow 3,000 rupees.

NIRU

If my husband finds out about this, he will pay you off and we shall have nothing more to do with you. End of story.

DAS

I will have to make things a little clearer for you then. When your husband was ill, you came to me to borrow three thousand rupees.

NIRU

I had no one else to turn to.

DAS

I promised to help you.

NIRU

And you did.

DAS

On certain conditions. You had to sign an agreement, with your father as guarantor. He needed to sign.

NIRU

Which he did.

DAS

I left the date blank. The agreement was that your father would date it with his signature. You remember?

NIRU

Yes. And he did.

DAS I gave you the contract to post to your father, he paid it, then I paid you the agreed sum.

NIRU And I have paid the installments on time every month.

DAS I understand your father was very ill at the time. On his death bed.

NIRU He was.

DAS And he died shortly afterwards. Tell me Mrs Helmer, can you remember the date of your father's death? The exact date I mean.

NIRU Baba died on 29th September.

DAS I did check this out myself – just to be sure – and there is a problem with the date.

NIRU Problem?

DAS Your father died on the 29th September and yet look here...

DAS produces a piece of paper from his briefcase and shows it to NIRU

DAS He seems to have signed it on the 2nd October. I only just noticed it myself and then I went to the births and deaths registration office yesterday to see if my concerns were correct.

I noted that the handwriting of the date is different to the signature. That of course can be explained – your father may have forgotten to date his signature and someone else filled it in for him, before they knew of his death. That's not the problem. It all depends on the signature – as long as that is genuine. Mrs Helmer? The signature is genuine isn't it?

To have to say this to the woman I have loved so dearly, that I still...but that's finished too. No more happiness.

it like that. You have sinned against me. It is your fault that I have nothing to show for my life.

TOM That's a terrible ungrateful thing to say! Aren't you happy here?

NIRU No.

TOM Not happy?

NIRU Maybe merry. And you have been so kind to me, but our home is more of a playroom. I am your doll-wife just as I was my Baba's doll-child before. And the children are my dolls.

TOM There's some truth I suppose in what you say...exaggerated I have to say ...but from now on it will be different. Play time is over and now comes the time for classes.

NIRU Whose classes? Mine or the children's?

TOM Why, yours Niru. And the children's.

NIRU You are not the person to teach me to be a good wife. And I cannot teach the children. Didn't you just say that I wasn't to be trusted to bring up the children?

TOM That was in the heat of my anguish...the letter from Das...I was distraught...

NIRU I think you were right. I'm not the woman for the job. I must educate myself and I must do this on my own terms. You are not the man for the job which is why I am leaving you.

TOM What?!

NIRU If I am to learn anything, I must learn to stand on my own feet. That's why I am leaving this house.

TOM Niru

NIRU I am sure Krishna will give me a bed for the night.

TOM You're mad! I won't let you. I command you to stay.

NIRU You can't command me to do anything. I'm taking my own personal belongings, I don't want anything of yours, either now or at a future date.

TOM This is ludicrous!

NIRU Tomorrow, I will go back to Darjeeling. My Baba's house is still there. I will find something to do there.

TOM What experience do you have?

NIRU I will get experience.

TOM You will leave your home, your husband and your children? Don't you care what people will say?

NIRU I don't care.

TOM You can't neglect your most sacred duty? Your duty to me and the children?

NIRU My most sacred duty is to myself.

TOM You are a wife and mother. That is your duty to God.

NIRU Tom, When I married you, I converted. But even before that, I only followed my father's religion. I don't really know if I do believe in God. I need to find that out too.

TOM This is incredible talk coming from a young woman. What about morals then?

NIRU Ah, morals. I'm a bit confused about that too. You see, we have different views on that, but I can't understand how a woman doesn't have the right to care about her father on his death bed or to try and save her husband's life.

TOM You don't understand the society in which we are living.

NIRU Maybe, so I I should try and find out

TOM You've completely lost your senses.

NIRU I feel completely calm and in control – like never before.

TOM So calm and in control that you can leave your husband and children?

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.

TOM This is treasonous talk.

NIRU That's a matter of opinion. But from what I can see, your tax office is designed to make Indians pay for our own oppression. That is unnatural.

TOM Then there's only one conclusion I can reach, which is, that you don't love me anymore.

NIRU Exactly.