The Unbearable Burden of Being A Woman: A Comparative Analysis of the Female Characters in *A Doll’s House* by Henrik Ibsen and in *Ademin Kaburga Kemği* by Ülker Köksal

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Abstract: Literature creates its own universal language. This language has always become the voice of mankind at large. Henrik Ibsen, a Scandinavian author living in the 19th century and Ülker Köksal, a Turkish playwright living in the 20th century depicted women characters confronted with social pressures and patriarchal conformity. Despite the fact that Ibsen and Ülker belong to different traditions, different cultures and different periods, there are striking parallels between these writers in their approach to the treatment of statues of women in a patriarchal society. This study aims at comparing female characters as represented in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and Ülker’s *Ademin Kaburga Kemği* and disclosing important points of contact between these two plays concentrating exclusively on the issue of the unbearable pressure and burden of being a woman in a man-dominated world.

Key Words: Ibsen, A Doll’s House, Women, Köksal, Ademin Kaburga Kemği

That literature is alive shows itself in the fact that it puts problems under debate. Any problem which remains untouched in literary circles is also bound to remain unsolvable. By doing so, literature takes on some responsibilities such as exploring the make up and meaning of human experience, creating some alternative worlds in which problems of any kind are portrayed in compelling and complex way, one that people feel them. Therefore, literature has become the most influential medium throughout history. Regardless of where and when it is made, whichever language it uses, and whichever cultural, social, economic, political and historical sources it feeds itself from, literature displays the most realistic, unchangeable and timeless nature of human being. Though men of letters attach to it such nationalities as English, American, Turkish or any other, literature creates its own universal language. This language has become the voice of mankind at large. Henrik Ibsen, a Scandinavian author living in the 19th century and Ülker Köksal, a Turkish playwright living in the 20th century depicted women characters confronted with social pressures and patriarchal conformity. Despite the fact that Ibsen and Ülker belong to different traditions, different cultures and different periods, there are striking parallels between these writers in their approach to the treatment of statues of women in a patriarchal society. Literature is said to be feminine, for it incessantly is fertile, and fertility is a characteristic of the woman; thus literature searches for the woman, and the woman finds herself in literature. Both Ibsen and Köksal look for woman, the lost, non-existing woman humiliated, exploited, abused by man or by the society controlled, organized and governed by man. Ibsen’s Nora in *A Doll’s House* and Köksal’s Güzin in *Ademin Kaburga Kemği* experience the same problems in different ways.

The first point of contact between the two plays is their titles. Both are very loaded terms in terms of how women are perceived in society. The title *A Doll’s House* implies that the house belongs to women. Nora steps into a comfortable and tastefully furnished room. She seems to be happy. The house seems to be a playground, which later in the play Nora will complain about this concept of ‘home as a playground’. Then Helmer gets in greeting her affectionately using endearments such as “little lark,” and “squirrel” - terms one might use with a child or a household pet rather than a partner or friend. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Helmer is denying her identity as a human being or member of the society with equal rights. Therefore, literature has become the most influential medium throughout history. Regardless of where and when it is made, whichever language it uses, and whichever cultural, social, economic, political and historical sources it feeds itself from, literature displays the most realistic, unchangeable and timeless nature of human being. Though men of letters attach to it such nationalities as English, American, Turkish or any other, literature creates its own universal language. This language has become the voice of mankind at large. Henrik Ibsen, a Scandinavian author living in the 19th century and Ülker Köksal, a Turkish playwright living in the 20th century depicted women characters confronted with social pressures and patriarchal conformity. Despite the fact that Ibsen and Ülker belong to different traditions, different cultures and different periods, there are striking parallels between these writers in their approach to the treatment of statues of women in a patriarchal society. Literature is said to be feminine, for it incessantly is fertile, and fertility is a characteristic of the woman; thus literature searches for the woman, and the woman finds herself in literature. Both Ibsen and Köksal look for woman, the lost, non-existing woman humiliated, exploited, abused by man or by the society controlled, organized and governed by man. Ibsen’s Nora in *A Doll’s House* and Köksal’s Güzin in *Ademin Kaburga Kemği* experience the same problems in different ways.

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... for Adam there was not found a help meet for him. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her to the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken
out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. (Gen. 2:20-24)

By this, patriarchs get the idea that the Bible clearly refers to a definite role in the home: a place for the wife and the mother, a very honored place, and a very particular place that she has in the home, and that it determines and designs her relationship to her husband and to her family, and her children.

So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nouriseth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord, the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband. (St. Paul's epistle:28-33)

Both plays reveal such a patriarchal attitude towards the woman’s role in the family and in the outside world:

HELMER: … No, no; only lean on me; I will advise you and direct you. I should not be a man if this womanly helplessness did not just give you a double attractiveness in my eyes. (64)
HELMER: … Be at rest, and feel secure; I have broad wings to shelter you under… How warm and cosy our home is, Nora. Here is shelter for you; here I will protect you like a hunted dove that I have saved from a hawk's claws… (65)
HELMER: … You talk like a child. You don't understand the conditions of the world in which you live.
HELMER: … no man would sacrifice his honour for the one he loves… (70)
HELMER: … Now, you must go and play through the Tarantella and practise with your tambourine. I shall go into the inner office and shut the door, and I shall hear nothing; you can make as much noise as you please. (38)
(Güzin and Fazıl are home… Güzin walks hastily between the kitchen and the bedroom with the baby’s bottle and diapers in her hands)
GÜZİN: The baby’s bottles are ready… the glass grater, the colander, the muslins…
FAZİL: (reading a newspaper) Look at this… Another wild fire…
GÜZİN: The baby food is ready… But why hasn’t this woman come yet? She ought to have come earlier. Fazıl, this woman still hasn’t come.
FAZİL: (still reads the paper) She will come soon…Don’t worry… Coal prices are up again… No good news in the paper. (134)
FAZİL: Do as you wish to do, darling…. You are free…
GÜZİN: So you say… Is that right? Thank you.
FAZİL: Look, honey… You don’t have to work… Just sit at home…
GÜZİN: (Angrily) No… I have to work. Though I do not know whether I will be freer when I work or not. Maybe one day I will have a better job. There must be other meanings of life. Other than the kitchen and diapers. I should do something for human beings. Just to change the world a bit. (137)

In the very opening scene, both plays get their women characters exposed to a ‘patriarchal siege’.

HELMER: When did my squirrel come home?
NORA: Just now. Come in here, Torvald, and see what I have bought.
HELMER: Don’t disturb me. Bought, did you say? All these things? Has my little spendthrift been wasting money again?
NORA: Yes but, Torvald, this year we really can let ourselves go a little. This is the first Christmas that we have not needed to economise.
HELMER: Still, you know, we can’t spend money recklessly.
NORA: Yes, Torvald, we may be a wee bit more reckless now, mayn’t we? Just a tiny wee bit! You are going to have a big salary and earn lots and lots of money.
HELMER: Yes, after the New Year; but then it will be a whole quarter before the salary is due.
NORA: Pooh! we can borrow till then.
HELMER: Nora! The same little featherhead! Suppose, now, that I borrowed fifty pounds to-day, and you spent it all in the Christmas week, and then on New Year’s Eve a slate fell on my head and killed me, and— ... (Ibsen 1879:1)

This is way of alienation and rejection of the woman who steps into an economic life in some way or another, even if she is dependent on her husband. Güzin’s case is a little different. First, she is exposed to ‘a cultural patriarchal siege’. That in her childhood she is reminded of her gender roles as a grown up woman by her mother, another woman, is significant. This means women should play not achieved roles but ascribed ones (Stark 2007).

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GÜZİN: Mother! I have a lot to study
MOTHER: Don’t tell me anything. You have to finish it first. You have had four days off and done nothing. Now you say you have to study. No! You have to do the ironing. When you are married, you will not be responsible for your lessons but the ironing. Get it?
GÜZİN: I wish I were a boy
MOTHER: ‘Tis a pity that you are a girl. I wish I had born you all boys.
GÜZİN: I will be a celebrity person when I am grown up, Mum!
MOTHER: Of course... If you get married to a celebrity man.
GÜZİN: I will never do it.
MOTHER: You have to. You should have a home. An unmarried woman is nothing in the society. At all events, the best is your husband’s bread.
GÜZİN: No... The best is one’s own bread. (Köksal 1994: 130)

In Ademin Kaburga Kemiği, Köksal argues that conventional limitations on women, which are regarded as the foundations of a ‘masculine society’, start at the very beginning of the childhood period. In a sense, this is a struggle for keeping ‘conventional patriarchal wisdom’ in society just by ascribing gender roles to girls and educating them with an understanding of ‘as the twig is bent so is the tree inclined’. In Köksal, this cultural infamily education tries to make grown-up women out of little girls. Therefore, Köksal brings us face to face with an ‘oppressed little girl’ who is forced to give up her childhood dreams, ideals and goals. Güzin carries the traces of this oppression up to her old age. Nora is by no means different from Güzin as a child. As a child, she is treated by her father as a doll, which also serves as another way of isolating the woman from the real world.

NORA: In all these eight years--longer than that--from the very beginning of our acquaintance, we have never exchanged a word on any serious subject.
HELMER: Was it likely that I would be continually and forever telling you about worries that you could no help me to bear?
NORA: I am not speaking about business matters. I say that we have never sat down in earnest together to try and get at the bottom of anything.
HELMER: But, dearest Nora, would it have been any good to you?
NORA: That is just it; you have never understood me. I have been greatly wronged, Torvald--first by papa and then by you.
HELMER: What! By us two--by us two, who have loved you better than anyone else in the world?
NORA: You have never loved me. You have only thought it pleasant to be in love with me.
HELMER: Nora, what do I hear you saying?
NORA: It is perfectly true, Torvald. When I was 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 doll-child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls. And when I came to live with you--
HELMER: What sort of an expression is that to use about our marriage?
NORA: I mean that I was simply transferred from papa's hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste, and so I got the same tastes as your else I pretended to, I am really not quite sure which--I think sometimes the one and
sometimes the other. When I look back on it, it seems to me as if I had been living here like a poor woman—just from hand to mouth. I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so. You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life. (Ibsen 1879, 66-67)

MOTHER: What have you done to your hair, Güzin? You are no longer a baby. You are a young girl. Come on. I will teach you how to spin yarn.

GÜZİN: (She is twelve. She doesn’t want to drop the book she is reading.) I don’t want, Mum.

MOTHER: I haven’t asked about your idea. You have to learn. (Köksal 1994:129)

GÜZİN: I hate knitting.

MOTHER: ... This is not knitting but embroidery. It teaches you how to be patient. A woman must be patient. (Köksal 1994:130)

GÜZİN: (She is eighteen) ... I will go to university...

MOTHER: What will happen? You can’t get married then...

GÜZİN: I am going to be an engineer.

MOTHER: Engineer? Are you crazy? Have you seen any woman engineer?

GÜZİN: I have.

MOTHER: Who put this into your head?

GÜZİN: My teachers. They say I have an engineer’s mind.

MOTHER: Do they say anything about how we can afford to send you to school?

GÜZİN: But you send my brother...

MOTHER: He is male. We have to send him to school. He must have a job. (Köksal 1994:132)

Both characters are shaped in their childhood, Nora by her father and Güzin by her mother, and transferred into the arms of a patriarchal society, their husbands and other masculine members of that society, as a doll, as a caring mother, an obedient wife, forced to be inured to their gender roles in the early periods of their lives.

Both plays shed light on the concept of marriage. Lord (1882) asserts that it is Ibsen who has so far shed some of the clearest light on marriage based on the character of Nora. She goes on to claim that the working of marriage between Nora and Helmer is hindered by some unfavorable circumstances. She attributes their failure to a false view of life. This view of life deprives women of reality (Lord 1882). How can we define the term ‘realities of life’? Economic affairs, social affairs, professional affairs, intellectual affairs, career-making, decision making, freedom, and sharing responsibilities with man (husbands) can be included in the list of realities of ‘modern’ life. In both plays, Nora and Güzin are denied getting involved in such realities. Therefore, both of them question their marriages towards the end of the plays. This questioning then turns into a settling old scores with life, husbands and society:

HELMER: How unreasonable and how ungrateful you are, Nora! Have you not been happy here?

NORA: No, I have never been happy. I thought I was, but it has never really been so.

HELMER: Not—not happy!

NORA: No, only merry. And you have always been so kind to me. But our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have 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 1879: 67)

... 

GÜZİN: Do I look so ridiculous? If a housewife is interested in literature, it is only a matter of fool. Is that so? I have the right to read sentimental novels and cry. But when I want to write, it becomes an object of derision. Funny, isn’t it? A woman whose main job is to do the ironing and washing up wants to write! How foolish! Besides, you think she cannot succeed, don’t you? You can’t imagine her fingers touching on the keys of a typewriter because they are for cleaning vegetables and mending a rip. Funny, isn’t it? All accomplishments are for you... To have a master degree... To study in a laboratory... To become a giant business person... All for you... You can have dreams... But I can only become a part of your dreams... I can’t have dreams... The ideal present for a woman is a pair of dish-gloves or a kitchen
apron...Those presents just suitable for my actual jobs... Or a brilliant ring... For you want your servant ornamented... And all these are not funny... But a typewriter?

It is funny. I do not seem funny when I am doing the cleaning; but I do when I am writing... (Köksal, 1994, p. 175)

Nora’s story is one which tells us her struggle to survive against her husband’s ego-centerism. Whenever he judges Nora, he puts himself in the center and brings his ideas, feelings and realities, which are also the realities of the dominant patriarchal culture, to the fore. This egocenterism determines Nora’s role in the family, and naturally in society, as the minor. He has a conservative theory on women’s role in the family and thus in the society. Also he shows his real ideas in the guise of some ‘pregnant words’ like ‘extravagant’, ‘spendthrift’, ‘That’s like a woman’, ‘reckless’, ‘odd little soul’, ‘skylark’, ‘featherbrained’ etc. Of course, the discourse Helmer uses when talking to Nora should not be excluded from what we call ‘pressures upon women exerted by man’. Both Güzin and Nora get exposed to a humiliating, reductionist, sexist, mocking, authoritative, destructive, dictating, dehumanizing, intolerant, hypocritic, oppressive, fatalist and a discriminative language:

HELMER: Nora!... The same little featherhead! Suppose, now, that I borrowed fifty pounds today, and you spent it all in the Christmas week, and then on New Year's Eve a slate fell on my head and killed me, and--Nora. Oh! don't say such horrid things. (4)

HELMER: Don't disturb me... Bought, did you say? All these things? Has my little spendthrift been wasting money again? (4)

HELMER: What are little people called that are always wasting money? (5)

HELMER: You are an odd little soul. Very like your father. You always find some new way of wheedling money out of me, and, as soon as you have got it, it seems to melt in your hands. You never know where it has gone. Still, one must take you as you are. It is in the blood; for indeed it is true that you can inherit these things, Nora. (7)

HELMER: Nice?--because you do as your husband wishes? (35)

HELMER: Have you really the courage to open up that question again? (35)

HELMER: My little Nora, there is an important difference between your father and me. Your father's reputation as a public official was not above suspicion. Mine is, and I hope it will continue to be so, as long as I hold my office. (36)

HELMER: My dear Nora, I can forgive the anxiety you are in, although really it is an insult to me. It is, indeed. Isn't it an insult to think that I should be afraid of a starving quill-driver's vengeance? But I forgive you nevertheless, because it is such eloquent witness to your great love for me... And that is as it should be, my own darling Nora. Come what will, you may be sure I shall have both courage and strength if they be needed. You will see I am man enough to take everything upon myself. (37)

HELMER: Doesn't she look remarkably pretty? Everyone thought so at the dance. But she is terribly self-willed, this sweet little person. What are we to do with her? You will hardly believe that I had almost to bring her away by force. (56)

HELMER: Why shouldn't I look at my dearest treasure?--at all the beauty that is mine, all my very own?

HELMER: Just listen!--little Nora talking about scientific investigations! (59)

HELMER: Little featherbrain!--are you thinking of the next already? (59)

HELMER: Miserable creature--what have you done?

NORA: Let me go. You shall not suffer for my sake. You shall not take it upon yourself.

HELMER: No tragic airs, please. (Locks the hall door.) Here you shall stay and give me an explanation. Do you understand what you have done? Answer me! Do you understand what you have done? (62)

HELMER: What a horrible awakening! All these eight years--she who was my joy and pride--a hypocrite, a liar--worse, worse--a criminal! The unutterable ugliness of it all!--For shame! For shame! (NORA is silent and looks steadily at him. He stops in front of her.) I ought to have suspected that something of the sort would happen. I ought to have foreseen it. All your father's want of principle--be silent!--all your father's want of principle has come out in you. No religion, no morality, no sense of duty--. How I am punished for having winked at what he did! I did it for your sake, and this is how you repay me. (62-63)
HELMER: ... And I must sink to such miserable depths because of a thoughtless woman! (63)

HELMER. You have loved me as a wife ought to love her husband. Only you had not sufficient knowledge to judge of the means you used. But do you suppose you are any the less dear to me, because you don't understand how to act on your own responsibility? No, no; only lean on me; I will advise you and direct you. I should not be a man if this womanly helplessness did not just give you a double attractiveness in my eyes. You must not think anymore about the hard things I said in my first moment of consternation, when I thought everything was going to overwhelm me. I have forgiven you, Nora; I swear to you I have forgiven you. (64-65)

NORA. No, that is just it. You don’t understand me, and I have never understood you either—before tonight. No, you mustn’t interrupt me. You must simply listen to what I say. Torvald, this is a settling of accounts.

HELMER: What do you mean by that?

NORA: Isn’t there one thing that strikes you as strange in our sitting here like this?

HELMER: What is that?

NORA: We have been married now eight years. Does it not occur to you that this is the first time we two, you and I, husband and wife, have had a serious conversation?

HELMER: What do you mean by serious?

NORA: In all these eight years—longer than that—from the very beginning of our acquaintance, we have never exchanged a word on any serious subject.

HELMER: Was it likely that I would be continually and forever telling you about worries that you could not help me to bear?

NORA: I am not speaking about business matters. I say that we have never sat down in earnest together to try and get at the bottom of anything. (66)

HELMER: Playtime shall be over, and lesson-time shall begin.

NORA: Whose lessons? Mine, or the children’s?

HELMER: Both yours and the children’s, my darling Nora.

NORA: Alas, Torvald, you are not the man to educate me into being a proper wife for you.

HELMER: And you can say that!

NORA: And I—how am I fitted to bring up the children?

HELMER: Nora!

NORA: Didn’t you say so yourself a little while ago—that you dare not trust me to bring them up? (67)

FAZIL: Never mind. All your sufferings will vanish soon. We will have a lot of money, and you will not have to work then. You will cast your resignation in the director’s teeth then. Get it? Then you will sit home and look after your children... (Köksal 1994:135)

FAZIL: That’s the natural order. I can’t do anything. You have to do what other women do. (Köksal, 1994, p. 178)

In Nora, Ibsen depicts the full glory of a woman who finally finds herself in opposition to all social norms. Leaving behind what she has collected and saved until that time, Nora walks away from the security of her household and from all traditionally sacred values of marriage and motherhood to face an uncertain but compelling future of self-becoming (Schwarez 1975). Nora escapes to an unknown and unknowable future from a sterilized doll’s house where she is not allowed to grow up as a woman and individual. This escape, in a sense, is a silent criticism of the society as well: Nora wants to see which idea is right: her idea or the society’s and naturally the man’s idea. She is blamed for being unaware of the burden and troubles of life and of being irresponsible.

HELMER: You talk like a child. You don’t understand the conditions of the world in which you live.

NORA: No, I don’t. But now I am going to try. I am going to see if I can make out who is right, the world or I.

HELMER: You are ill, Nora; you are delirious; I almost think you are out of your mind.
NORA: I have never felt my mind so clear and certain as tonight.

Nevertheless, she is fully aware of the heavy burden of being a woman in a man’s dominated world. The roles attached her by this society evaporate her natural identity. In Güzin’s case, one can say that she is too matured to have an identity of her own. She does not live her own life rather is forced to live her husband, her daughter and her son’s lives. Unlike Nora, Güzin surrenders herself to the oppressions:

GÜZİN: (to her daughter) Günseli, I thought... well... You should accept that job in that laboratory...
GÜNSELİ: No, mum. I can’t carry on with it after I have born my baby in any case...
It requires a great deal of responsibility to work there...
GÜZİN: But you have to... If you are to promote in your profession... Just accept it...
You are much more talented than others... I will look after the baby...
GÜNSELİ: No, mum... We have already hired a baby-sitter... we will get along with it...
GÜZİN: No...I want you to go to the whole length in your job... Don’t give in... I don’t want you to cut short your career.
GÜNSELİ: But mum...
GÜZİN: Accept it... I will look after my grand baby... I will get retired any way...

The vast difference between appearance and reality in Nora’s life drives us to the idea that women have two worlds: one is the world imposed on them by their husbands, if they are married, or by the society, the other is their inner world which is a constant conflict with the first one. They are suspended between these two worlds. The same oppressive and evaporating impact can be said to be implemented on Güzin. She has to give up many of her dreams and expectations from life. At the beginning of the play she says she is going to become an engineer, not get married and lead a free life. Soon we see her as a married woman with two children and a boring job getting drowned in routines. Our heroines are not allowed to hold tight onto their dreams.

The two women characters strongly feel 'time strain' throughout the plays as well. Nora’s case comes from her past involvements. Her past, which hangs above her head like the sword of Democles, deeply shapes her present. As for Güzin, she is also a product of her past and present. The roles imposed on her even at an early age, harsh working conditions for women, social constraints, then familial duties and responsibilities make Güzin appear as a desperate woman just at the beginning of the play. The present time also puts pressure on Güzin in the form of her colleagues, her husband and children’s expectations of her retirement. Güzin can be considered to be a little luckier when compared to Nora: both have deferred their dreams, but Güzin, with the help of an old friend, has the ability and opportunity to fulfill her most ambitious dream; to be a writer. Unfortunately, Nora looses all her dreams and expectations. From here, a burning question awaits its answer: is there an after-life for these women? (Ondul 2007) The answer is not clear; but for Nora, it seems impossible or very difficult to lead an afterlife. Similarly, for Güzin, it seems to be difficult but not impossible for she keeps at least one of her ambitions still warm and alive: to be a writer.

In A Doll’s House, Ibsen guides and haunts for the emancipation of women (Schwarez 1975). Koksal tries to do the same in Ademin Kahurğya Kemiği. Güzin’s arduous struggle to exist as a woman in an environment surrounded by patriarchal principles is no less striking than Nora’s. For some time, both Nora and Güzin think principles or orders might bring happiness. When Güzin says “I know principles do not make us happy”, she has already understood that the society or the world needs reorganizing. This might come as a counter-attack, perhaps not launched directly; but at least Güzin reorganizes her inner world. Similarly, Ibsen’s Nora realizes or individualizes herself just by opposing the social rules. For some, this is a glory because of Nora’s slamming the door to the face of her husband and, in the name of her husband, to the society. Güzin’s final decision can also be considered to be a glory, for she says enough is enough, which can be called an uprising. Both writers, just because of the societies into which they were born, in which they grew, just because of their interests and sensitivities, dealt with the oppressed, isolated members of the society, those who did not live in easy circumstance. Actually, to bring such characters to the stage and to show other people that somewhere in the world some are suffering is the responsibility of literature. Both Ibsen and Köksal felt this responsibility in the depths of their hearts.
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