

LITERARY JOURNEY

In Ibsen land. . . some stories

KAJAL BANDYOPADHYAY

IN Oslo in August 2006, a group of individuals that included me was shown around the Ibsen Museum which was at one time Henrik Ibsen's home. The Bangladesh delegation to the grand closing of the year-long Ibsen centenary program in Oslo included Md. Quazi Manzur-i-Mowla, Kamaluddin Nilu, Professor Sonia Nishat Amin, Professor Ahsanuzzaman, Ashish Khondakar and the writer. Foreign participants' visit to the museum was an important part of the closing of the programme. On 23 May 2006, the Norwegian Queen opened the new Ibsen Museum and a comprehensive exhibit featuring Ibsen's life and work. On that date exactly 100 years ago, Ibsen passed away at his home in Arbins Gate 1. For the last 11 years of his life he lived in an apartment at Arbins Gate 1, Oslo. We were told that the apartment-turned-museum has the playwright's own furniture as well as the original fixtures, décor and colors. The visit thus took us backstage and introduced us to his private life, private belongings. The museum tells a personal story about the private life of an aging Ibsen. One gets an authentic impression of the playwright's home. The restoration of floors, walls, ceilings and surfaces was done according to on-site archeological findings supplemented by historic research.

We found the museum quite centrally located in on Henrik Ibsen Street, right across the royal palace. It's within walking distance of the National Theater also. The exhibits there depict the great playwright in some personal perspectives, with many personal belongings shedding light on his political and aesthetic views. The guide, with whom we could hardly keep up, as she rather raced and fluttered around its rooms, told us at one stage that the particular ending of *A Doll's House* is one that Ibsen gave to the play under his wife's influence. One from our delegation then dropped the sound, "Ha-a-a!" Others exchanged looks. But, as we know, there's no end to the uproar over the supposedly feminist message of this play that rises mostly from its closing scene. This then reminded me of the particular speech that Ibsen delivered in Oslo on 26 May 1888 before the Norwegian Women's Rights League: "I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of mankind in general. And if you read my books carefully you will understand this." We had on our team a number of strong feminists; and in both our *adda* and serious activities like paper-presentation we differed a lot on related issues.

One day, after a seminar-session at Oslo University, I found Prof. Sonia Amin in a debate with a Norwegian participant over Nora's role in *A Doll's House*. Later I came to know that the gentleman was none else than Trond Woxen, an Ibsen scholar whose essay I had read and quoted from. I had felt at one with some of Woxen's views about Nora. In the glass-covered showcase at the entrance to the museum, I spotted a book published by Routledge that had been declared unreliable by one Ibsen scholar at an international Ibsen conference held in Dhaka. So that was both very



Henrik Ibsen

thrilling and vindicating for me personally for, taking the cue from that book, I had placed one piece of information at the conference about Ibsen's involvement in radical politics in his early life. At Ibsen museum, all of us had the other gratifying scope of getting photographed with Nora Ibsen, Ibsen's great grand daughter.

In 1994, Oslo had opened the Ibsen Museum to honor its most famous writer. The curators had tried to re-create the apartment (a longtime exhibit at the Norwegian Folk Museum) as authentically as possible. The study, for example, had Ibsen's original furniture, and the entire apartment was decorated as though Ibsen still lived in it. So, it was duly called "a living museum" and regularly scheduled talks on playwrighting and the theater, recitations and theatrical performances. The library, dining room and parlours were open to the public. The study, where Ibsen wrote his last two plays, *John Gabriel Borkman* and *When We dead Awaken*, is still the "crown jewel" of the museum, but after the restoration of the floors, walls, ceilings and surfaces in the 320m2 grand apartment and deposition of the original furniture from the two other Ibsen Museums in Norway, the authenticity in the other rooms is now close to impeccable. Some other information I could gather about this renovation or recreation of the Museum go as follows:

When Suzannah Ibsen died in 1914 the home was dismantled and the furniture scattered. The municipality of Kristiania assumed possession of Henrik Ibsen's study and bedroom and deposited all of it at the Norwegian Folk

Museum. The library went to the county museum in Skien (now Telemark museum) and the dining room to the Ibsen House Museum (now the City of Grimstad's museums). The family retained possession of the remaining furniture. In 1990 actor Knut Wigert took the initiative of renting the apartment, based on a wish to make it available to the public. As a point of departure for further restorations, studies were done documenting the most important rooms in the apartment. The Norwegian Folk Museum took over responsibility for operations in 1993, and Ibsen's study was restored but limited resources and a lack of original artifacts resulted in only this particular room being given an adequate presentation.

The Ibsen family has made an important contribution to the opportune results. Ambassador Tancred Ibsen has lent out and donated a large amount of personal property inherited from his great-grandfather; and his cousin, the actor Joen Bille, has for many years helped us with the task of locating and reacquiring original furnishings.

At this house in later years, Ibsen would often stand by the window, and discovering him there was a regular and popular attraction for all sections of people in Oslo. On coming back to Bangladesh, I was looking for more information about the Ibsen Museum, and could collect some of them. Sigurd Ibsen (Ibsen's son), as expected, had taken some significant decisions after his mother's death in 1914. He gave his father's study and bedroom to the city of Kristiania, the reading room to the county museum in Skien and the dining room to Grimstad, where the chemist's shop in which Ibsen had worked had been made into a museum as early as in 1909. Since Henrik and Suzannah Ibsen had leased the apartment at Arbins gate 1, Sigurd did not wish to continue to pay rent on his parents' home any longer than was necessary. Sigurd is said to have promised his parents to keep the furnishings from "the red drawing room". So, he took the furniture from that room and most of the paintings to Villa Ibsen in Suisi near Bolzano in Italy, where he lived until his death in 1930. All these went out of the family's possession in 1968 when the place was sold to some Italians. To one's relief, and thanks to the Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs of Norway, the furniture could be bought back in 2002. The paintings are still to be found in Villa Ibsen, but the Ibsen Museum has with the assistance of Ibsen's great grandchild, the actor Joen Bille, been granted the right of pre-emption.

In Ibsen's study, our attention was particularly drawn to a portrait of Strindberg. As some of us may very much know, the Swedish playwright hated Ibsen. And Ibsen was aware of Strindberg's antagonism towards him; yet he kept a portrait of Strindberg on his wall: "I cannot write a line," he remarked, "without that madman standing and staring down at me with his mad eyes." I tried to recollect how Strindberg adored Nietzsche, and had made that clear with an extreme metaphor: "My spirit has received in its uterus a tremendous outpouring of seed from Friedrich Nietzsche, so that I feel as full as a pregnant bitch." Maybe Strindberg shared his master's view of life as a perpetual struggle between the strong and the weak. One may remember also how Strindberg placed some Ibsen plays in his so-called

misogynistic statements: "You'll see there's a good market for 'Woman Hate' now," he wrote to his publisher in 1888. "*The Doll's House* period is over." Again: "What would have happened to *A Doll's House* if Helmer had received a little justice? Or to *Ghosts* if Mr. Alving had been allowed to live and tell the audience that his wife was lying about him? No just blame everything on them, blacken their names, tread them in the mud so that they haven't a square inch left clean that makes for good theater!"

Ibsen was closely connected with a number of other greats of his time and world. As for painting, Edvard Munch (1863-1944) comes first, and the guide at Ibsen Museum mentioned him a number of times. It could not be otherwise, particularly because Munch's iconic image, *The Scream* (1893), is in many ways a response to the restrictive and hypocritical society Ibsen so thoroughly disapproves of. However, Munch's connection to Ibsen runs much deeper: the painter created more than 400 illustrations of Ibsen's plays. At fourteen, Edvard Munch made his first illustration for Ibsen's *The Pretenders*—the drawing *Skule Baardson and Bishop Nicholas*. There are stage drafts, illustrations, portrayals of characters, and variations on Ibsen's themes throughout his work. Munch inserted his own portrait and sometimes those of other prominent persons into Ibsen's plays, and even if Ibsen never sat for Munch, he made portraits of Ibsen himself.

On the other hand, Ibsen had taken big interest in Munch's work titled *Woman in Three Stages*. And the latter was sure that this work had inspired him when he created the three main female characters in *When We Dead Awaken* --- Irene, Maja and the deaconess.

Moments before his death, Henrik Ibsen sat up in bed and said in a loud, clear voice: "On the contrary" ("Tvert imod"). We are told also that this parting phrase or message can serve as a summary of Ibsen's personality. In his writing also, he demonstrated scepticism towards established truths, raised doubts, objected and asked both compromising and uncompromising questions.

Kajal Bandyopadhyay teaches English literature at Dhaka University.

POETRY



Obedience

MONOMOCHAN DUTT
Trans. SYED NAQUIB MUSLIM

Anything that is attracted by your Self
Be advised to give it up.
You have gained Life from God,
And so to Him your Self resign.
He who obeys the word from conscience
Great persons call him obedience.
He who wittingly disobeys injunctions divine,
Slowly shall engender his own ruin.
He who all the time disobeys
Receives from God all disgrace.
Obedience is the beautiful edifice of service
Its exterior is devotion, its entrance patience.

Syed Naquib Muslim is a senior civil servant and connoisseur of literature

Two days, you say?

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Two days, you say, when the sun will not rise?
When the stars will be in slumber?
When the moon will hide behind a veil of clouds?

Two days, lady, is a lifetime for a mendicant.
Two days without your laughter is an elegy.
Two days without your eyes is darkness in the storm.

In two days, pretty woman, the skies go grey.
In two days, death comes and becomes memory.
In the space of two days, the soul loses song.

In two days, thousands have died in history.
Two days have been an eternity for weary soldiers.
In two days, pestilence has put paid to a child's life.

For two days, priests have prayed for rain and wind.
In two days, blistering heat has left the earth parched.
Two days, my goddess, are days lost to eternity.

And two days you will not be here, you say?
Two days when age will creep in, sink in?
For two days, the strings will refuse to play.

For two days, dream woman, no dreams will rise.
For two days the blustery winds will blow.
For two whole days, the heart will crouch in pain.

Two days, Radhike, when Krishna will not sing.
For two days the mythical flute will stay silent.
For two days the stream's gurgles will not be heard.

Two days, just two days, when Pompeii died.
For two days Leonard Woolf searched far and wide.
For two days Virginia Woolf remained untraced.

Don't go, woman of wild, engrossing beauty.
Stay, for two days, and then go for three.
For two days let me serenade you night and day.

Will you still go? Will you yet stay away?

Syed Badrul Ahsan is with The Daily Star.

NON-FICTION

SAMIRA NAFIS

THE sun glares overhead and our shoes squish in the occasional puddles of mud until we enter the courtyard. A sudden gust of wind precedes us, blowing the covering off her hair as she crouches over the clay stove, stirring something with a bronze spatula. Inevitably, she is wearing an unstarched cream sari which had aged just like her, gracefully. My sister and I enter the grounds noiselessly, creep up behind her as she concentrates on the quality of her *lal shak*, red spinach, and erupt with a sudden yell. She pretends to be frightened, prompting us into fits of giggles. After a tight hug or two, depending on how long ago she had last seen us, she goes back to her cooking, making sure the *lal shak* is the right shade with the smell of the burnt red chillies stinging our nostrils. Nanu is preparing the feast for her little sparrows.

An active member of her community, Nanu was well known in her village for her unerring wisdom and sound judgment. People sought her advice about what to name their newborn children, how to settle disputes, how to start a vegetable patch. She always knew who should marry whom, whether her neighbor on her left should continue to live with her selfish son and daughter-in-law, or if the neighbor on the right needed rice or lentils to make dinner for her large family. I once asked if she knew everything

Lal Shak . . .

there was to know in the world, and she laughed and said she did not know farming. It wasn't just for advice that people came. Sometimes they would drop in while she was cooking and stay on for the meal. She could feed the whole village if she had to. She knew every family in the village and every single child by name.

But most of all, Nanu loved her grandchildren. Whenever we would go to visit her in Bikrampur she would make sure she had slaughtered the fattened chicken or bought the best hilsha fish. She had over thirty of us to cater to, but never all at once, which was fortunate. I enjoyed the undivided attention, and in fact, craved it. She never said everyone had to eat *lal shak* just because she had cooked it. No, that was for me. Just like my sister had her tomato lentils and my favorite cousin had her potato or coriander mashes.

Nanu prided herself on her spinach garden, her *lal shak*. She knew it would be the one dish I would ask for in my shrill five-year-old voice. That was the year I started liking it, my memory informs. And it was usually this very dish that she was cooking whenever we went to visit my mother's village.

She knew when we were in the vicinity because the neighbors often ran ahead to tell her that her youngest daughter had arrived from Nigeria with her family in tow. She loved each of her children but she adored her youngest especially because she hardly got to see her and her children. And the preparations would begin. She would

make sure she picked the freshest new leaves of the red spinach for my feast. Although I didn't quite understand the details of how she kept her garden at the time, she explained more as I grew up.

Lal shak has its season and although many people have the expertise to grow it all year round, its best flavors are out in the winters. Nanu knew this, of course, but we arrived in Bangladesh only on our summer vacations. So although she complained about the quality of her cooking, I usually gave her my best wry look and gobbled down as much as possible.

There was no particular secret to cooking red spinach; everyone I knew could prepare it with ease. But the particular taste of Nanu's cooking never left my tongue. I tried it once or twice at most in my teen years in Nigeria but I never had the guidance of Nanu, so I would mostly trust my tongue. I remembered that it was the dry red chillies that did the trick. They had to turn a certain shade of brown and sometimes burst open as they are lifted over the open fire which would choke us even if we were a few yards away. This was the final touch.

In 1998, Nanu fell ill. We couldn't make our annual visits any more due to financial constraints, although Mum went home to tend to her mother. But I made sure I tried my hand at *lal shak* more often then. I wanted to feel close to her. This was our bond. She knew I was cooking for her during those times, imitating her every move as though offering a prayer to the one beyond who knew my pain and hers. I never found out what she had fallen ill with. I didn't want to know.

Dad bought spinach at my insistence. It was difficult to find in Lagos. I would wash it thoroughly and make sure not one precious leaf strayed from the bunch. I would strain the leaves and leave them in the strainer as I heated oil in a small pan. I would fry the onions until they turned golden brown, then add the spinach and some salt. Slowly the water from the salt would cook the leaves, turning them rusty brown with a hint of a dark green here and there. Then the final touch, the fiery smell of red chillies. Mum never let me try this part in the kitchen; we had to burn the chillies outside so that the house would not be filled with that pungent, fiery smell.

The task done, food in hand, I prayed with every bite that things in Bangladesh would be fine. The next time I called, she had forgotten my name.

Nanu has now been gone for ten years. People keep saying that it doesn't feel like ten years, but I've felt every minute of it. Mum tries to compensate even today when the *lal shak* is served. She thinks calling me her little sparrow will cheer up the gloom that settles over me when I see it served on my plate. My mother does not look anything like Nanu, but in our conversations I realize she is becoming like her mum, a woman of wisdom and will power and the capacity to love everyone around her. That is the piece of Nanu I have left, and soon it will be the piece that Mum leaves me.

Samira Nafis grew up in Nigeria. She graduated with a BA in literature from BRAC University last year.

