

IBSEN, IN OTHER WORDS

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Young, ill-educated, convinced that I had the run of a much larger world than the one into which I had been born and boasting of an ambition far greater and more sophisticated than my reach, I felt often like a child in a candy store hungering after the sweets he knew he couldn't have. Eager, ill-read, unfamiliar with the backgrounds of the authors I meant to read, I was often ill at ease in the literature section of the library, staring open-mouthed and in awe at the thousands of books I hadn't seen, much less read. In addition, I was subdued by the fact that I had no idea how I was going to fill the evident gaps in my reading in order for me to catch up. It was no easy thing to find yourself ogling the titles of hundreds of books neatly lined up and waiting to be taken out on loan or read right there and then. I could see that many others were comfortably sitting at one of the desks in the corners, and reading quietly. But I was too agitated to join them, and I turned my gaze away in self-rebuke, pulled myself together again and, heading out the door, worked up the enthusiasm to focus on the job at hand.

I was intent on making a random choice, having forgotten what book I had come to borrow, when I felt the pull of a sweet smile from a female fellow student who was almost on top of me. I sensed a sudden awakening and felt embarrassed at the thought that she could hear my heavy breathing. She asked if I was OK. I replied that I had difficulties in making a choice, didn't know which book to borrow and read.

It would have been less demanding on my heart, and perhaps more comforting to the rest of me if I had admitted that I had no inkling which of the thousands of books written in a babble of tongues I should borrow and immerse myself in: Samuel Beckett, Virginia Woolf, Albert Camus, one of the Bronte sisters, William Faulkner, Simone de Beauvoir, or Rabindranath Tagore. She took me by the hand as you might a lost child. She led; I followed. Her footsteps were decidedly steady; mine slow. I was fully at sea; I was hesitant. Nevertheless, I was at once touched and delighted that she had taken upon herself to save me from my sense of paralysis. When we stopped and she let go of my hand, I stared at the spines of the row of books, appearing confounded. Untroubled, she pulled out a book, consulted the contents page and then with a smile radiating an apparent confidence in her choice, she gave me a volume of Ibsen's plays. I had never heard of his name or what he had written, nor what country he came from or in what language he had done his writing. She took one step away before turning to face me again, her features now brimming with untold mysteries. I felt then that she was maybe promising me a future not yet lived – I had no idea what or why. Then she suggested that I read *A Doll's House*. When I looked at her questioningly, she said, "It's a helluva of a play, fantastic, and you'll enjoy it". Then she took off so fast, as though she was being chased, and walked unsteadily. I could only stare in mesmerized silence at the back of her head and at the colourful sari she was wearing, at once startled and fascinated, as if I was in the presence of a beautiful bird with a formidable array of feathers teasingly waving goodbye to me.

The year was 1968. I was twenty-two and an undergraduate at Panjab University, Chandigarh, India, where instead of preparing for my annual exam, which I was to sit in a couple of months, I started working on my second novel, my first attempt having been rejected by a Nigeria-based publisher to whom I had sent it. I was determined to prove the editor, who had written to me the most denigrating refusal letter ever received by a young author, wrong. Essentially the editor felt that nothing that I wrote would ever amount to anything. Anyhow, as I left the university library with the volume in my clutch, I knew I wouldn't have the time to read Ibsen before plotting a new novel, which would help me to pass muster as a writer and turn into my vocation. Ibsen could wait, I convinced myself, so could the annual exam, which I knew I could retake, but not the book with which I was pregnant. I would have to deliver myself of it, without delay – and soon.

A few days later, I happened to be sitting in the row behind my fellow female student and I remarked that she was eager to communicate with me. I turned away, feigning disinterest. She passed me a note via another student sitting closer to her. In her message, she wondered if I had read *A Doll's House*. When I replied that I hadn't, she passed me another note, lamenting, "What a damn shame!" I suggested that she and I meet after class and talk; only I forgot that I had another class and we didn't link up, which was just as well. After all, I could read Ibsen in the interim, and I could then tell her what I thought of it.

Then on the very day I received the second and final notice to return Ibsen to the library – by which time I had done massive work on my new novel, plotting it, even though I didn't manage to put much needed flesh on its bare bones - I read the Signet Classics edition of *A Doll's House* in the 1965 translation by Rolf Fjelde at one sitting. I loved it; I was moved by it, fell under its decisive spell. I became an Ibsen fan - no question about it. It is a measure of my admiration for it that all the time I was reading and turning its pages, there was a touch of heavy fog in my throat, tugging at my larynx, and with my eyes misted over for days afterwards, I was rendered speechless. And no sooner had the fog lifted, and my vocal cords were mine again, and no sooner had the mist cleared than I knew Ibsen would serve as a point of reference as well a fountain of inspiration for my novel. Then I ransacked in its pages for something - I know not what. Luck was on my side and I found a treasure buried there, gems of immense value waiting for me; I found my muse.

What impression did Ibsen make on me when I first read him forty-four years ago? I thought of him as a genius at work, and felt ennobled, my faith in the creative minds of authors strengthened, knowing the work. The spontaneity of my joy and the fact that I could recite passages of Ibsen to myself took me back to my childhood, to the days when at my Koranic School we would be encouraged to drink the ink with which we wrote the verses of the Scripture once we washed the slate. It was believed that ingesting such blessed ink would be a boon from which our growing minds would benefit. Enough, I said to myself. Ibsen has done his work; now it is my turn to do mine.

Flushed with euphoria, fired up, I gave in furiously to an overpowering fever of writing, which flowed with ease. My daylight hours ran into my nights without pause, my notebooks filled with my hurried scrawls. Above all, I was very taken with Nora's defiance, which, because of its unanticipated suddenness, stopped me in my

tracks. Put it this way, since Ibsen's ability in giving human scales to credible tragedies has no equal, I decided to use his play as a template for my novel, beginning mine where he ended his. For this purpose, I would borrow the dialogue that takes place between Nora and Torvald and use it as an epigraph. Would I be infringing copyright law if I quoted the exchange between Nora and Torvald in its entirety? For a short while I even called the novel, "I am a human being" - a sentence taken straight from Nora's speech, in Rolf Fjelde's rendition. As an aspiring young first time author ready to strike on his own, *A Doll's House* had a great deal of resonance for me; it provided me with wings with which my imagination could fly at the same time as it supplied me with a kind of rootedness, a rootedness which allowed my plants to germinate and grow my own garden in my own soil. The long and short of it is that I could not have written *From a Crooked Rib* if I had not read *A Doll's House*.

To my surprise, I entertained doubts, serious doubts just before completing the draft. It required an act of courage to stay the course, pay no heed to Mark Twain's counsel, "When in doubt, strike it out," - and to rewrite, trim the text, recasting it, revising it so I could say that I was my own man for good or bad, not a mere galley slave to Ibsen - copying him, pilfering his works, borrowing his words. I couldn't tell if my approach to the entire process of reshaping the text of my novel were appropriate, worthy of any merit, if the draft I was about to end would be deserving of praise. But how to explain the doubts, the fact that I developed cold feet when I was at the tail end of the novel?

Because I realized belatedly that there is a big difference between Nora - a bourgeois mother and a wife brought up in Europe as a Norwegian declaiming that even though she was a mother and a wife, she was "before all else a human being," - and Ebla. Ebla is a Somali nomad girl, an African and a Muslim. She is in her late teens, as yet unmarried, as yet untested and until then unlettered. To all intents and purposes and according to the country's tradition, she is valued at no more than a chattel and is considered the property of men, men who have the power to do with her what they please. It wouldn't do for her to be holding forth in a similar manner as Nora and daring bold statements comparable to Nora's without fear, worry or recrimination. On top of being unlettered, Ebla is at the beginning of what one hopes will be her never-ending challenge to male authority. Nora, on the contrary, is at the nadir of her infamy. Both are strong-minded women, but whereas Nora, as a wife, may take to slamming the door on her society and tradition and telling her husband off, Ebla hasn't a door to slam - nomadic huts have no doors of which to speak; only a cloth discreetly serving as a door - I thought it would be unthinkable of Ebla to behave as Nora has done, having not yet known men for what they are.

There is in addition the important matter of perception: Nora has the moral right to declare her position, which she has earned by dint of her elevated status, as a mother and a wife and has a catalogue of claims and privileges to which Ebla is not entitled. Unlike Nora, Ebla, because of her standing in everyone's eyes, lives in the world's margins. As an African and as a Muslim, she is disenfranchised. Many people in many parts of the world questioned and still question if Africans form part of humanity, as we understand it. The doubts to which I became host made me more than a shade suspicious that it was senseless for Ebla to declare her own humanity,

when the gaps between her world and Nora's and the perception of their places in their respective societies are so different. I thought that the debate – whether Africans were human beings and if by extension Ebla is or is not human - is a debate best left alone for the time being.

On the one hand, Nora can slam the door on her marriage towards the end of the play, because she has the moral right as the wife of a man whom she has saved from financial trouble. Ebla on the other hand is at the beginning of a precarious life; she hasn't the authority to slam doors on anyone, least of all on the tradition, which has left her unprepared, has made her bereft of workable, that is to say, viable alternatives. She escapes, leaping into the void, fleeing in the dark of night, bolting into the unknown, because that is all she can do – make a quick exit from the scene and then see. She doesn't know the male-devised cruelties that are in wait for her in the first town she goes to, nor more dastardly cruelties that will demean her, destroy her spirit once her brute of a husband installs her in the city and then abandons her to her own means. Ebla's world is a world run by men, and there is no future in it for a woman like her. It is good that she has the iron will and gumption not to allow anyone to do any damage to her inherent dignity, prepared to protest any situation that may diminish her. This way she makes her own future the best she can: a woman with the strength of will to fight her corner. Of course she is unlike Nora in many significant ways and acts on social convictions and narrative conventions that are Somali in the main. I felt aping Nora would only detract from the entire work, not enrich it.

Even so, despite the latent misgivings stated here, I was exceedingly happy to read and reread *A Dolls House*, and delighted to mine it for its evident riches. An enhancing, enthralling work, Nora's heady speech had me spellbound, winning me over with its appropriateness. I repeated the speech to myself time and again; making its sound positions echo, percolate through to my senses. When I mentioned my fascination to one of my lecturers who knew of my interest in becoming a novelist, he dismissed it first as an infatuation, saying that the trouble with reading a classic is that you think that it is one of a kind, that there is no other work like it. And he suggested I move on, that it was time I read other classics, time I “cured other bacons, partook of other banquets,” as he put it. (Curiously, he was a Hindu and a vegetarian and knew I had been brought up a Muslim – but we just stared and smiled, in silence.) Then he sent me on my way and suggested that I read more fiction and less theatre, despite his knowing that I was at the time writing skits for the Indian Family Planning unit of the All-India Radio – just for fun.

If in the end I did not use Nora's words, “I am a Human Being,” as the title of my new novel, preferring to call it, *From a Crooked Rib*, it was because I was worried that the novel might be misread, construed as part of a universal debate going on those days and going on even at present – essentially whether Africans are or aren't humans. At the time of writing the novel I recall coming across Indians who held shockingly racist views about the peoples of our continent, many of them wondering if Africans were human beings. I did not want the work, my first published work, left open to a misunderstanding of the kind, which a first time author and a young African at that could do without. I feared that the “I am a human being” quote would not have strengthened, advanced, complemented or qualified the strong-

headed character Ebla's self-belief; rather, it would have weakened it, and it would have undermined the novel's "noble" intentions, diminished its vigour, detracted from its worldly strengths.

I doubt I can quantify Ibsen's influence or measure it in any way. His influence was subtle, albeit more substantial than that of many others whose names I've mentioned as having influenced me over the years. I've always written my significant works in relation to other works, glad that I could piggyback on other writers and forge my own ideas out of the smithy of the ideas garnered from them.

Unpaid debts owed by young authors to writers of great eminence, especially when the loans are unacknowledged, have a way of haunting the mental landscape of the purloiner. Understandably young authors are quick to borrow, but are slow to express their public gratitude or to acknowledge the extent of their borrowing, afraid they might be accused of lacking in originality. It is much worse if they are found to have pilfered a greater author's property, get caught red-handed and then are pilloried from pillar to post. No wonder young authors seldom dare appropriate much less integrate the materials they borrow into their texts without worry. Could it be that in their self-consciousness they remind themselves of what T.S. Eliot said: that immature poets imitate and that mature poets steal? My attitude was fraught with all manner of dangers. After all, I was most certainly no mature poet, and what is more could not even call myself a writer; nor had I any way of knowing if any of my earlier efforts at writing was worth a goat's fart. Yet I felt a visceral approval of Eliot's view, believing not only that every book is written in relation to other books, but also that I had a good chance of succeeding in my endeavours provided I had the perseverance to stay the course. But the question I couldn't answer right away was, if not being a mature writer, would I benefit in the least from stealing – and what if got caught?

On reflection, even though I am in no position to reassemble a new engine from the metal scrap out of which it was salvaged, yet I believe I did the right thing appropriating the bit of work that went into the making of my novel, not because I imagined I had acted as mature writers do when stealing, but because I doubted then just as I doubt now after more than forty years that I could quote Ibsen's Nora's defiant speech, appropriate or cull it by using the rephrased words as the title of my first novel and then get away with it - especially because had I gone ahead and done it, it would not have served any good purpose; it would have weakened the thrust of the argument I was intending to make.

Still, I am indebted to Ibsen, in that his work helped me articulate an idea that I held dear and I had no way of expressing or the bravery to write - until I met it expressed so eloquently in his play. It was he who gave my undeveloped idea a certain validation, which is something of immense value to a writer in the raw, a writer ready to be moulded, a writer prepared to learn and willing to listen, a young man living and raised in a world unlike Ibsen's and whose cultural and religious backgrounds were in reverse to his. I was lucky that my rawboned thoughts about the position of women in society could draw strongly on his highly developed awareness. Not that I encountered these ideas touched upon, alluded to or written

about by the African, Arab or for that matter the Muslim writers whom I had come across and read until then. It goes to show how the creative mind functions; how, in fact, a Norwegian through and through in his every action, a European in his every attitude and nuance, his every stance, life and works informed by the European culture of the day can influence a Somali, with all that this is supposed to mean, a Muslim-born at that and an African to boot. It was his forward-looking audacity that appealed to me most, because I too wished to do my thing as a writer, unafraid, following the artist's instinct, braving the hostility that artists were likely to meet, and confronting the controversy that would isolate almost all true artists from their birth communities.

To write this talk, I packed a paperback volume of Ibsen's four major plays, carrying it with me on my recent travels in Africa. My aim was to reread, locate and isolate the quotation I was searching for and I had with me the 1965 Fjelde-translated version, in which Nora describes herself as a human being. In the 1961 version, Nora says, "I am an individual as much as you are – or at least I am going to try to be." My own preferences aside – I can't read the text in Norwegian anyhow – what inspired me was Nora's courage to strive to be a full human being, a person with her own rights, rights for which she was prepared to fight her battles, as a woman.

The plays were pleasurable company as I travelled from Johannesburg to Accra and from there to Lagos. In Nigeria, I visited several major cities, including Kaduna, where I spent years during my second long sojourn in that country. I was in a very difficult marriage, much worse and more debilitating than Nora's, even though I stayed in it and did not dare to plumb the depths of my secret agonies, maybe because I was in mourning. I was in grief: my mother had just died; Somalia's state structures had collapsed and having collapsed erupted into a civil war, the worst we've known. Unmoored, I was on edge, adrift. Writing became hard; living became a lot harder. It would take me ten years to do a novel, *Secrets*, the most pessimistic book I had written until then. *A Doll's House* was the wrong play to reread in Kaduna; that is for sure.

In Africa these days, just as in Norway during Ibsen's days, a woman is a woman, is a woman – hardly a human being. The proverbs in many of the world's cultures attest to women's lowly status. I was accosted many times by women and men alike after *From a Crooked Rib* appeared in 1970: the men were clearly upset about my depiction of marriage in Somalia; that we almost condone rape, since we insist on the rapist making a good woman out of his victim by forcing her to marry him, instead of punishing him; that we continue practicing female circumcision. They accused me of the worst crime ever: giving our country a bad name. The women were no kinder. Many of them thought it wasn't my place as a man to speak of some of the intimate matters with which the novel deals.

As I crisscrossed Africa, now going west to Ghana and Nigeria, now flying south to Johannesburg, and thence to Kenya and Somalia all the while reading and rereading *A Doll's House*, I sensed that Africans would be united in their empathy with Nora, but only so far and no further. They would sympathize with her insistence that she was a human being, even though they wouldn't accord her many rights themselves. Identity in much of Africa is generic: you are a wife, a husband, a

Father, a Mother, an uncle, an aunt, an in-law. Your identity is defined by your relationship with those amongst whom you are. In my travels amongst people unknown to me, I was addressed as “Daddy,” – a man is expected to be married, raising children and being a father: what else can he be? We are ageists too, and because of this, many people I came across called me “old man” in South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya – I have no problem with my age; I am delighted I look my age. In Somalia, the women’s union is known as “a union of mothers,” and in other parts, such associations, even political may be called “wives’ union.” though we privilege our cognate connections and are of the habit of addressing each other this way, even though we are not at all related. I suppose from what he says and how he thinks Torvald Helmer would be at home in Africa – a woman is a woman, a wife and a mother and those are her identities. But like Nora, Ebla wouldn’t be comfortable with the generic identity in which a woman in Somalia is addressed with the derisory word intended as a put-down: “Naayaa!” - meaning “Hey you woman!”

There are choices that are made as part of a package. I am referring here to Ibsen’s original play and to the one with the German alternative ending. It delights me to say that I’ve read the latter version with the alternative ending only recently – and I can’t for the life of me understand why Ibsen caved in to the pressure the theatre directors in Hamburg and Stockholm put on him. I also prefer Fjelde’s translation to McFarlane’s. To me, even though I have no Norwegian, Field’s agrees more with Ibsen’s spirit, accentuates his risk-taking, and highlights his humane intent, proof enough, if one is needed, that he was a great writer from a small country from whom a much larger world has benefited.

It’s Ibsen’s spirit – strong, yet not at all overwhelming, generous to point of giving others a lot more than he has ever received – that presides in large part over the early years when I was a mere debutant, eager to learn the tricks of the writing trade. I am sure that there are many others for whom he is a guardian angel, a patron unlike any other. And I salute him. I thank him.

Biographical note

Nuruddin Farah, who was born in Somalia, is a novelist, playwright, essayist and short story writer. He divides his time between Cape Town, South Africa, where he resides and Annandale-on-Hudson in upstate New York, where he teaches general literature at Bard. He is the author, most recently, of *Hiding In Plain Sight*, his twelfth novel and is also the recipient, among other prizes, of the prestigious South African Lifetime Literary Achievement Award bestowed on him in December of 2014.