Meeting Points of Ibsen and Rabindranath

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Abstract One point sometimes needs to be made during Ibsen-discussion done on behalf of Bangladesh, about how the struggle for national independence here started out of a historic language movement that took place in 1952. One major related truth is that from "the first, Ibsen was associated with cultural independence, particularly as a result of his appointment as resident dramatist and later director at the Norske Teater" (Innes 7). Henrik Ibsen's role is thus clearly comparable to that of Rabindranath and other literary greats of the nineteenth and twentieth-century Bengal; for, by "choosing to write his poems and plays in Norwegian" also, Ibsen "was making a political statement" (Innes 8). In this article, I compare historical details surrounding these two paralles as well as the cultural and political roles that both Ibsen and Rabindranath played. My main focus will be on parallels and correspondences between Rabindranath and Henrik Ibsen, their joint relevance and its implication for some debates in theory.

Key words Henrik Ibsen; Rabindranath Tagore; meeting points

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First, I briefly recount some of the national and social concerns of both Henrik Ibsen and Rabindranath in order to show how their similarities provible a point of departure for discussions about modernity and modernism.

1

As is well-known, at one stage of his life, Ibsen gave up the plan to become a doctor and turned to literature. At twenty, he wrote *Catiline*, even in case of which Ibsen's true concern has been said to be Norway, and not Rome, "It was Norway in its peaceful slumber of reclusion from the 'big world' that Ibsen wished to arouse" (Clurman 28). In 1850, another play, the one-act *The Warrior's Barrows*, was staged at Christiania for three performances. Harold Clurman writes as follows, "Shortly after this debut he engaged in semi-political journalism and wrote theatre criticism. Through his verse and other miscellaneous writings he began to attract a little attention as a nationalist poet" (Clurman 14). And it was at this time that Ibsen paired with Ole Bull, the renowned violinist, in another nationalistic venture. Bull's efforts to plead with the Storting (the Norwegian parliament) to support the Norwegian theatre he had set up in Bergen had failed. But nationalistically this theatre had more meaning than the one in Christiana; for, there the language was still Danish. To help one get more light about this situation, I can place what is available from the translator of Haldvan Koht's *Life of Ibsen*:

> Although Denmark and Norway had a common literary language, pronunciation of this language differed widely in the two countries. Danish, with its extensive changes from the old Scandinavian, could at times be difficult for the Norwegians to understand. Danish actors using Danish pronunciation were traditionally preferred on the stage until well after the middle of the nineteenth century. In Ibsen's generation a change occurred; thanks to the agitation of Bjornson and others, cultivated Norwegian pronunciation was introduced on the stage to replace the characteristically Danish sounds. The difference was comparable in degree to that between an extreme Oxford pronunciation and a general American pronunciation. (Clurman 14)

Bull and Ibsen met, talked and felt that they could create a "Norwegian theatre" together. They started on a heated campaign. In 1851, they arranged a musical evening to raise money—"Ibsen contributed a prologue in verse, read by an actress, and Ole Bull composed a song with music sung by a choral ensemble." What one cannot but mark is that Ibsen's playwright's career was thus conspicuously shaped by the later part of this campaign. For, as Harold Clurman informs us, "Shortly after, Ibsen signed a contract to assist the theatre as an author." And, "The theatre's directorate decided to grant him two hundred dollars to go to Copenhagen to study stage technique. He could then qualify as a stage manager and director, under a five-year agreement at three hundred dollars a year" (Clurman 15). Clurman who claims to have "seen and liked" some of Ibsen's "Bergen designs for settings and costumes," informs us also that "As the house author, he was commissioned to dramatize "the life of the nation." (the assignment was very much in the vein of our federal project of the 1930s when artists were instructed to "paint the national scene) Thus, Ibsen's playwright's career and his nationalistic objectives developed in the same vein and track.

The Bergen Theatre granted Ibsen release when he was offered the post of "artistic director" at the Christiana Theatre. He began work, as usual at such times, by announcing an "ambitious program." Regarding future activities of Christiana Theatre, Ibsen, according to Haldvan Koht's paraphrasing,

> the inner life of drama, not just its outward action, should reflect the spirit of the nation—an idea in keeping with the constantly reiterated plea that a work of art should do no more than simply strive to imitate nature or life. Art must search out spiritual truths (in Ibsen's words), "that higher symbolic representation of life that would clarify the questioning thoughts of people." (Clurman 16 –17)

It was for the Christiana Theatre that Ibsen's next play, *The Vikings at Helgeland*, was written in 1858. But when its production was postponed by its trustees, Ibsen came out with "a sharp attack" on them in a "national liberal newspaper," stating that the theatre "was unable to support, encourage or in general bother itself about

Norwegian dramatic literature." A representative of the theatre brushed this aside, calling Ibsen "a major nonentity."

What else may impress any one of us is how, after the closure of Christiana Theatre because of financial loss, Ibsen, as additional preparation for coming up as a "national Norwegian dramatist," applied "for a grant to collect country legends, ballads, folk tales; above all to make contact with people along the way." Harold Clurman comments as follows: "The trip proved of inestimable value" (Clurman 19). We can, in this connection, mention also what, while engaged in shaping *Brand*, Ibsen wrote to his publisher, "I find it my god-given talent to arouse my countrymen from their lethargy and make them understand what direction the great issues of life are taking." His then was like a sense of mission "to awaken the nation and to lead it to think great thoughts." It was at that time that Ibsen also said, "Every one of us must strive to improve the state of the world." We are told also that at that time Ibsen's "attitude toward the theatre was very much as Schiller's had been when in 1783 he said of Germany, 'Had we a national theatre, we could become a nation'" (Clurman 22).

It is thus that we find Ibsen to have emerged as a brilliant playwright particularly as a product of the nationalistic churning that took place at that time. Christopher Innes, coming to appreciate *Hedda Gabler*, a quite late play in Ibsen's career, offers to do so only "against the political, social and literary background of the period." Innes' categorical claim is that, "Ibsen's development as a playwright can only be understood in terms of the cultural battle for Norwegian independence..." Innes elaborately explains why things came to a particular pass where the question of Norwegian theatre or culture got entangled with that of the Norwegian nation,

> Until 1814 Norway had been ruled by Denmark. It was then transferred to Sweden, in a union that again subordinated Norwegians to a foreign king, though they gained a limited local autonomy. Despite the political changes, during the first half of the century Norwegian art and literature remained almost exclusively Danish, while the Norwegian language itself was largely restricted to the peasants. But, in the year of Ibsen's birth, 1828, the historian Rudolf Kayser had initiated a new Norwegian history" by giving a series of lectures maintaining that linguistic evidence showed that Norway had been populated by "Nordic" tribes from the north, while the Danes and Swedes were originally "Goths" having come from the south. This played a crucial part in the struggle not only for a Norwegian culture but for a Norwegian nation. (Innes 5)

Innes adds much more information to what Jon Nygaard tells us about Ibsen's involvement "in the early workers movement"—as to how in 1850 "moved by the political passions that had swept Europe, Ibsen helped to establish a short-lived highly political newspaper, *Andrimmer*, which called for the dethroning of the Swedish King and the founding of a socialistic republic in Norway." Later on, after Ibsen's "narrow escape the previous year when his *Andrimmer* co-founders ... were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms," he rejected "practical political involvement", and "by joining the Norske Teatre in 1852,... placed himself at the forefront of the cultural struggle." What this "cultural struggle" meant becomes clear from some "integral elements in Ibsen's early plays: the recording of folk-lore and the historical glorification of the Vikings (which became the subject of his early heroic tragedies), and the development of the Norwegian language." Innes writes, "From the first, Ibsen was associated with cultural independence, particularly as a result of his appointments as resident dramatist and later director at the Norske Teater. In choosing to write his poems and plays in Norwegian, Ibsen was making a political statement" (Innes 7-8). What thus becomes clear is that giving up political activism for Ibsen did not at all mean ceasing to be political. His contribution to Norwegian nationalism was no less valuable for its belonging to the area of culture.

2

As for the part of Rabindranath Tagore coming from both Bangladesh and India, we can start by mentioning how, because of the stirring spirit of nationalism and patriotism therein, two Tagore-songs are now the national anthems of Bangladesh and India. This is perhaps a unique case in the whole world. People of Bangladesh and India were so inspired by Rabindranath's works that two of his songs were chosen to be the national anthems of both of the countries.

There is endless other information to be placed in support of Rabindranath's upholding the causes of his colonial country, India. We are told that he "had expressed his patriotism as far back as 1877 when he read his poem attacking the Delhi Durbar. His letters from London in 1878-80 extended his range. During the 1880s and especially in the 1890s he gave vent to some sharp criticisms of the British—his comments on the opium traffic with China and the Sedition Act, for example" (Dutta 141). With a mysterious similarity to the pattern of Ibsen's life or activities, Rabindranath decides to revive Bankim Chatterjee's journal, *Bangadarshan* (Mirror of Bengal) that had been the literary sensation of his teens. He edited it from 1901 for five years." There is another detail interesting so far as the venue of this Ibsen Conference is concerned. In *Bangadarshan* that Rabindranath edited, he "enthusiastically reviewed *Letters from John Chinaman*, a book anonymously published in Britain in 1901 purporting to be letters from a Chinese government official criticizing the British in China. (In fact, the author was Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson.) Rabindranath then also "replied to Lord Curzon's suggestion in a speech in 1902 that the East was prone to exaggeration or extravagance'." "More significantly he cited the *Arabian Nights* as an example of eastern exaggeration about the East, and Kipling's just-published novel Kim as an instance of western exaggeration" (Dutta 142).

In an essay titled, "Taking a Dip" written in 1984, at the age of only 23, Rabindranath placed his deep understanding of how true love, even for one's country, was indivisible, or how it had to be love for the whole mankind. Rabindranath wrote, "The world is present in every *katha* or *bigha* of land. So there has to be universalism if one goes for truly loving even one katha of land of this world" (Roy 20). Quite early in his life, Rabindranath proved his clear realization also as to how senses of self-interest might turn nationalism or patriotism into a destructive phenomenon, and how thus these also had dialectically opposite potential. In Bangadarshan of 1901, Rabindranath wrote, "Conflict is the nature of interest. In the domain of European civilization, that conflict is increasingly flaring up. Signs are there that there will be push and pull and grabbing over parts of the world" (Roy 20). Rabindranath rather pointed at Europe as example of how self-interest pollutes patriotism:

> Attachment to people's countries in Europe is what is impeding the desire of attaining humanism, attaining success, and European civilization is turning into a big horror for most of the world. Europe is seeking for soil only, for gold, domination—doing that in such a greedy manner, horrendous manner that human's eternal craving for truth, light and immortality is evaporating from before Europe and making her violent. It is the path towards annihilation; it is not the path towards, it is annihilation. This example of Europe before us, very near us, is working as an everyday illusion. (Roy 20)

Rabindranath proved the very sharp eye necessary for marking that nationalism was a historical development, and particularly that it had its basis in people's growing reliance on science coming up to create their own competence. It was thus that they could give up senses of religious identity and opt for statehood on the basis of senses of national identity. He categorically connected it with the point of time since when "their minds were made free from fear through discussion of science." Referring to independence, Rabindranath claimed that "establishment of self-rule is not one outside happening, it depends on the confidence on the intellectual capacity of one's own on which one's own competence principally bases itself" (Roy 21).

Rabindranath thus proved himself very perceptive and quite ahead of his time by marking both the good and bad of nationalism, and by marking also how Europe had turned imperialistic because of the narrowness coming from capitalistic greed there. Though he was for a long time in sort of an obsessive grip of liberal ideas of appreciation of the British rule in India and such other places, finally he could look straight into the true face of British imperialism. He then castigated it, and advocated for sort of one internationalism for the welfare of the whole of our world and mankind; he even claimed this to be the lesson coming from the sadhaks (devotees) of India, of driving away divisive ideas. It is not even that Rabindranath did not mark how arrogance of nationalism had resulted into extermination of whole races in South America and Australia. He explained the First World War also to be an imperialistic venture, as he wrote the following:

> Provision for human sacrifices was being made from different directions at the altar of worship of gods of national boundary. No fuss was there so long foreigners could be sacrificed. Suddenly in 1914 tension raged among the priests for sacrificing each other... It is this misjudgment which is called nationalism, collective arrogance on the part of a country. (Roy 20)

What is amazing is that Rabindranath again connected this with the change-bringing impacts of science and technology, and asked the question, "Who will unify whom the forces of science have brought together"? (Roy 21) He perhaps identified the social or political system to be what holds back or divides the nations among whom the barriers of geographical distance have been made to go by science.

3

Now, do the two—Tagore and Ibsen—prove some parallels and meeting points? What is remarkable is that coming coincidentally from a colony-like country like Norway located surprisingly in Europe, and proving many comparable thought-patterns and mindsets, Henrik Ibsen, like Rabindranath, had both positive and negative attitudes to nationalism, liberty, independence, etc. As related earlier in this essay, he was very much for the independence of Norway from Danish clutches, and contributed a lot to the cultural part of that struggle. But, with an artist's characteristic keenness, Ibsen developed the opposite edge of the nationalistic passion also. One historic event is particularly responsible for that. It is how in course of the war of 1866 Prussia annexed the Danish provinces of Schleswig-Holstein. Now, what led Ibsen to and confirmed him in his opposition to the nation-state and his pan-Scandinavian patriotism is the lack then of support for Denmark from Sweden and Norway. Like Rabindranath, Ibsen developed over time much sharper eyes than he had, and what followed is what critics describe to be the naturalistic or realistic phase of his playwright's career. And therewith followed an ebb in nationalism. Christopher Innes writes, "His letters, and later public speeches, also show that as he turned to naturalistic work, with its inherent criticism of society, he was less concerned with nationalism than individual freedom" (Innes 8).

Sharper eyes for issues and interests of individual citizens led Ibsen to question the worth of the state or its authority also. As Rabindranath, in spite of coming from a colony and feudal background, could see the big value of the October Socialist Revolution, Ibsen also proved radical insight into the problem. In his letter to George Brandes, of December 20, 1870, he gave out the almost Gramscian attitude to liberty, "I must confess that the only thing I love about liberty is the struggle for it; I care nothing for the possession of it" (Innes 24). For, herein comes the well-known Gramscian sense of the importance of will. Doesn't this sound like the Maoist idea of constant revolution also? Like one upholder of dialectical and historical materialism, Ibsen wrote as follows, in the same letter:

> The great events of the day occupy my thoughts much at present. The old, illusory France has collapsed.... Up till now we have been living on nothing but the crumbs from the revolutionary table of last century, a food out of which all nutriment has long been chewed. The old terms require to have a new meaning infused into them. Liberty, equality, and fraternity are no longer the things they were in the days of the late-lamented guillotine. This is what the politicians will not understand; and therefore I hate them. (Innes 24)

One may not like or may very much misunderstand what more Ibsen then writes in that letter about politicians: "They want only their own special revolutions—revolutions in externals, in politics, etc. But all this is mere trifling. What is all-important is the revolution of the spirit of man" (Innes 24). What he writes to Brandes in a separate letter, of February 1871 helps people to understand his leftist ideas.

> I shall never agree to making liberty synonymous with political liberty. What you call liberty I call liberties; and what I call struggle for liberty is nothing but the constant, living assimilation of the idea of freedom. He who possesses liberty other than as a thing to be striven for, possesses it dead and soulless for the idea of liberty has undoubtedly this character; that it develops steadily during its assimilation. So that a man who stops in the midst of struggle and says: "Now I have it"—thereby shows that he has lost it. It is however, this dead maintenance of a certain given standpoint of liberty that is characteristic of the communities which go by the name of states—and this it is that I have called worthless.
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> Yes, dear friend, the great thing is not to allow one's self to be frightened by the venerableness of the institution. The state has its root in time: it will have its culmination in Time. Greater things than it will fall; all religion will fall. Neither the conception of morality nor those of art are eternal. To how much are we really obliged to pin our faith? Who will vouch for it that two and two do not make five in Jupiter? (Innes 24 – 25)

At different parts of this long quotation Ibsen sounds like so many well-known kinds of radicals or revolutionaries. And, finally he sounds so much so Marxist in his attitude to state, religion, institution, morality, art, etc. —all being viewed as changeable over time. He finds almost no place for "faith" in any of these. In a letter written to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, he wrote, "It is said that Norway is an independent state, but I do not value much this liberty and independence so long as I know that the individuals are neither free nor independent." He denounced "prejudice, narrow-mindedness, wrong-headed notions, dependence and the belief in groundless authority." We know how Ibsen personally suffered from the narrow morality, conservatism and provincialism of Norwegian society. And, as we have found above, proving a third phase of comparableness with Tagore, Ibsen even went to question the necessity of a state. As this one can never be an absolutist position, there was contradiction in the relevant views of both Rabindranath and Ibsen; we can elaborate on them, but before that we can recognize that both had perceptions of the harm of the state. Though Ibsen accepted pension and public honour from the state, we can quote again what in a letter to George Brandes, he wrote, "There is absolutely no reasonable necessity for the individual to be a citizen. On the contrary—the state is the curse of the individual."

4

It is not that Toril Moi does not recognize Ibsen's nationalism. She even quotes Ibsen's very memorable words uttered in the context of *Rosmersholm*,

> Anyone who wishes to understand me must know Norway. The spectacular but severe landscape which people have around them in the north, and the lonely shut-off life—the houses often lie miles from each other—force them not to bother about other people, but only their own concerns, so that they become reflective and serious, they brood and doubt and often despair. In Norway every second man is a philosopher. And those dark winters, with the thick mists outside—ah, they long for the sun. (Moi 36)

And, if this is not all for getting the true or whole Ibsen, this is a portion. Definitely there were other conditioners and shapers—national culture and international, to which Ibsen exposed himself. Toril Moi goes for a critical analysis of Ibsen's above ideas, of 1886; she admits that "Ibsen here gives voice to a still powerful national myth, for I know highly urban, postmodern Norwegians who believe the same thing." She further writes, "The powerful romantic image of the Norwegian landscape and the equally powerful belief in its metaphysical connection to the Norwegian soul was crucially important to Ibsen and to everyone else living in Norway in the 1840s and 1850s" (Moi 38 – 39). Moi then raises the point of connection between all these and the political picture:

> At the time, the quest for national autonomy did in fact take the form of a quest for a highly idealized national identity and a veneration of the spontaneous expression of the Norwegian soul. That Ibsen was inspired by these trends is obvious, but to acknowledge that the young Ibsen at times saw himself as a national bard does not oblige us to consider his whole career from that point of view. (Moi 39)

This Toril Moi mentions both in spite of and in support of her recent and scholarly thesis in *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* that "places" Henrik Ibsen as a "founder of European modernism." Though Moi does not write off "Ibsen's modernity," hers is definitely an effort at bringing a shift, and relocating Ibsen. One wonders at what then happens to Ibsen's unbelievably strong involvement with Norwegian nationalism and other social issues of his time, most of which were projects of modernity. We find Jon Nygaard telling us that "The basic concept in order to understand Ibsen's vision of identity, freedom and power is 'Modernity'." and then defining "Modernity in a general sense" to be "the institutions and modes of behaviour established first of all in post-feudal Europe." Modernity's is thus an anti-feudal and pro-capitalism role. The way we find many other critics also to have denied Ibsen's national and social involvement and created for him an identity of a writer of closet plays only, Moi's new thesis, however well-intended, gives a wary look. We cannot make out why Moi finds modernism to be an indispensable position for one playwright like Ibsen and why then she goes even for an elaborate redefining of modernism for making in it a room for Ibsen. What transpires is that because of Norway's delayed delivery from kind of a foreign rule, modernity was still and more a valid program there to which Ibsen catered in his cultural and literary ways. In Bangladesh, the historic

Language Movement, secular nationalism and other modernity projects were highly facilitated by Rabindranath and other literary greats. Little arises there even now the question of applicability or relevance of postmodernism, etc. ; ideals and concepts of even modernism appear to have been rather superimposed on us. And it is by his projects of modernity that Ibsen also impresses us so much, in spite of the spatial or temporal distance that is true for him in our case in the sub-continent. How to make out Ibsen's modernism if it was mostly a colonial or post-colonial Norway then, as even Moi finds? We cannot think of locating Rabindranath or most other literary greats of India in modernism or post-modernism.

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