



Keynote by
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Nora's sisters

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1.

Dear friends, ladies and gentlemen. Once, when Salman Rushdie was in Oslo, I asked him if the great epic poetry of India - like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana - had influenced him as a storyteller. "Not directly, perhaps," he replied. "But I know they're there, in the same way as I know the high mountains are there."

Henrik Ibsen's writing - and not least his many female characters - has been of such significance for Norwegian literature that we who write today are not always conscious of the extent to which we constantly draw on the great poet's riches for material and inspiration. Ibsen's influence on the Norwegian language and on much of what we call the Norwegian "national soul" has been so immense that nowadays schoolchildren often criticise Ibsen's plays for being too full of old proverbs and sayings. (In fact it was Ibsen who minted these "sayings". When he wrote, they were brand new.)

Despite this legacy, I was astonished when earlier this year - which happens to be the centenary of the writer's death - I was asked if I had ever realised that my own Sophie from the novel "Sophie's World" was in many ways a counterpart to Nora from Ibsen's play "A Doll's House". No such thought had ever crossed my mind. Now however I see that it does in fact make sense to call Sophie Nora's little sister. And it's quite possible that I would never have written her story the way I did without the influence "A Doll's House" has had on me throughout my adult life. But let's start from a different point.

2.

Short exposition of "Sophie's World" (without manuscript), a novel about the history of European philosophy. 2 minutes.

3.

"Sophie's World" was first published in Norwegian in 1991. When it began to come out in many other languages - and also gradually to appear in more far-flung corners of the world - I was often asked why a "novel about the history of philosophy" had a hero or main character who was female. To be perfectly honest, my first reaction was that this was an odd question. Why does "Sophie's World" have a main character who is female? Well, why not? There were times when I found myself reminding my audience that in Norway we have only two sexes, and that they are regarded as equal. The main character naturally had to be either a man or a woman, and if I'd chosen a young man as my main character, the question would have been why I had *not* chosen a young woman.

However, on more mature reflection, I realised that my choice of a young woman as the heroine of "Sophie's World" was both appropriate and relevant. The fact is that in this particular novel the main character had to be a young woman.

4.

The name Sophie comes from the Greek word for "wisdom", *sophia*. Hence the Greek term "philo-sophy" which means "love of wisdom". And *sophia* is a feminine concept. In both Judaism and early Christian theology, God was said to have a female aspect too - a feminine mask or personality - in Sanskrit she might have been referred to as God's *shakti* - and she was called *Hagia Sofia*, which means *The Holy Wisdom*. We can for instance find the name *Hagia Sofia* as the name of the old church in Constantinople (or today's Istanbul) dating from the 6th century.

Now, this leads us to ask *why* wisdom has been seen as a specifically female characteristic. I have a theory of my own, and though speculative, it does at least have a rhetorical point: ***For women it's often important to try to understand something. Whereas for many men it's more important to be understood.*** This is clearly evident in the relationship between Nora and Helmer. Nora is trying to understand. Helmer wants to be understood. And philosophy is not concerned with the latter. Philosophy seeks understanding and true knowledge - no matter how disquieting it may be.

In ancient Athens, Socrates was the very model of a philosopher. And he, by the way, declared that he had received his philosophical insight about *eros*, or love, from a woman called Diotima. Socrates said: "There is only one thing I know, and that is that I know nothing." But he was eager to learn, and he tirelessly sought wisdom and enlightenment. His antitheses were the so-called *sophists*, who were teachers of a sort, men who took money for making themselves understood.

The main character of "Sophie's World" was to be the incarnation – or *avatara* – of philosophical endeavour itself. Hence she had to be a young woman. And her name was self-evident. Sophie - meaning wisdom - is a very common girl's name throughout the whole of Europe.

5.

Nora deserts Helmer and the doll's house taking with her doubts about all established values. She goes back to scratch, to doubting absolutely everything - even the philosophical and religious. What is a human being? What is religion? My own Sophie also lives in a kind of doll's house. First she liberates herself from her parents, and then gradually, as she studies philosophy and discovers that in reality her life is being lived

inside a writer's imagination, she tries to free herself from the author's power over her and from a "reality" whose framework has been created by others rather than herself.

Nora has to deal with Helmer, and Sophie has to deal with Hilde - who inhabits a different reality than her and to whom the story of Sophie's world is narrated. Just like Nora when she breaks out of her "doll's house", Sophie too takes with her a stubborn belief in the impossible, she too hopes that "the miracle of miracles" will happen - that one day she will establish real contact with Hilde and communicate face to face with her.

Just as Socrates was surrounded by sophists, so Nora is hemmed in by people who "know better", like Helmer, Krogstad, Dr Rank and Fru Linde. Both Nora and her little sister Sophie are in a sense tragic heroines who in the final analysis prove themselves to be stronger than their fortified surroundings.

One of the most striking scenes in world drama is the actual denouement between Helmer and Nora in the final scene of "A Doll's House". As far as Nora is concerned, there is no way back to the "doll's house". Nor is there for Sophie at the end of "Sophie's World". Both Nora and Sophie surrender themselves to things they don't understand, to uncertainty about their own destiny, to the unknown. But they do so with a burning desire to comprehend. Both set out on their own paths - or *sva marga*. Both dare to face the existential vacuum on the way to constructing true and relevant values. Nora has the courage to leave husband and family - something unheard of in Ibsen's time - and Sophie does something similar. Her "children" are Govinda the tortoise, Sherekan the cat, and the budgerigars Smitt and Smule.

Sophie's bold, energetic need and desire to gain control of her own existence is perhaps something she has inherited from Nora. At all events, it isn't hard to pick out certain sisterly traits.

6.

We have talked about wisdom, insight and understanding - three central concepts in philosophy, but also three key words for Nora and for Ibsen's many plays in general.

In a lot of Indian philosophy - in the Vedanta for example and especially in Buddhism - ignorance or *avidya* is the root of all evil. It interests me that the ancient Sanskrit word *vidya* - or insight - is the same word, or at least has the same root, as the Greek word *idea*, the Latin word *video*, the English word *wisdom*, the German word *wissen* - and for that matter the Norwegian word *viten*. So, too, the Sanskrit word *jñana* meaning knowledge - as in *jñana-marga* - is found in European

languages. Greek has the etymologically related *gnosis* (as in ignore or agnostic), Latin *cognoscere*, and English to *know*.

That these words for wisdom, insight, knowledge and understanding are to be found right across the Indo-European area, says something about a profound disposition or need we share in common. We want to understand, comprehend or *see through* the very essence of this enigmatic world we are living in – and not just obey it's conditions. Much of what we call philosophy is a genuine Indo-European project. It's easy to see the equivalents to the Indian philosophical schools (or *darshanas*) – like the dualistic *Samkhya* or the monistic *Vedanta* – in Greek and European philosophy.

Norway and Scandinavia had its powerful female figures even in pre-Christian Norse mythology - as Ibsen well knew - and this, in turn, is genealogically related to Vedic mythology. The functions of the gods across the Indo-European area are so similar that we can talk in general about a characteristic Indo-European pantheon. Even the names of some of the gods are connected.

If we go back three or four thousand years, certain aspects of Nordic and Indian culture had the same root - possibly in a proto-Indo-European people who originally lived somewhere between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. When Nora meets her sisters here in India, we shouldn't entirely dismiss the idea that in so doing she's involved in a kind of reunification - rather like two river courses that have diverged for many miles, but then come together again further downstream.