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Nora's Sisters: The Test of Re-Vision

Andrea Pető

(This essay was written on the request of the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Budapest)

“HELMER: Before all else, you are a wife and a mother.

NORA: That I no longer believe. I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are - or at least that I should try to become one.”

(Translated by William Archer)

Employing the concept of re-vision by Adrienne Rich, this Ibsen-anniversary provides a perfect opportunity to analyze the closing lines of Ibsen's most often performed and politically most inspiring play. The idea of re-vision – so often cited since Rich's speech in 1971 – denotes the act of

looking back on old texts from the new critical directions of the era, raising fresh questions. According to Rich, re-vision is “for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival”. For women living in a male-dominated society, this means the recognition of the necessity that by understanding the past, they should be able to take part in creating a future without discrimination. On 26th May 1898, Ibsen expressed his often-quoted view regarding the problem of the closing lines of *A Doll's House*. He was invited to a women's conference in Kristiania (present-day Oslo), where he thanked for the applause he was greeted with, but then he refused to be saluted as having consciously fought for women emancipation. “My task was portraying human nature” – he emphasized. In contrast, the 13th October 1907 issue of *A Nő és a Társadalom* (Woman and Society) – the journal of the Feminist Association – quoted Ibsen: “Modern society is not a human society; it is merely a society of males”. This is the paradox: The first wave of the women's movement praised Ibsen

as one of their allies. Still, he lived up to the expectations for contemporary writers in distancing himself from the movement, despite the fact that he played a key role in establishing its theoretical principles. This is a topical issue in present-day Hungary, and not only because the members of the early feminist movement, just as their European contemporaries, left their own dollhouses. Though, in *A Doll's House*, Helmer believes that after all everything was all right in his relationship with Nora: they "just" could not face the problem which "was without a name" in Ibsen's or even in Betty Friedan's age: the problem of the suffocating life of middle-class women in the suburbia, and the lack of individual freedom for women. The women's progression at the turn of the century (also) read and re-interpreted Ibsen's plays, recognizing the symbolic power of the name. However, the struggle for naming this "problem" freely, the women's fight for equality regarding political, economic and social rights as referred to by the closing lines of the drama is currently going on in the world and thus in Hungary, too.

According to Rich, the process of re-vision also contributes to the making of the feminist consciousness, and

even with or maybe due to the surrounding discrimination, it is based on the conviction that in spite of all this, the world can be changed. Therefore, the process of re-vision denotes a development from a second-rate status into becoming a full-fledged, politically active citizen. In other words, it represents the story of Nora. Yet, this re-vision does require a "vision", as well. Nora should be able to realize that there really is another life outside the dollhouse, and that there are new (or regarded-as-new) notions. The idea of re-vision – as applied by Rich – requires conscious female citizens who are able to create new forms of female subjectivity that are free from the constraints of the dollhouse. Here, Ibsen could have a key role once again, since in *A Doll's House*, he described it with candid precision that there is nothing "natural", nor "inevitable" in the way the cult of domesticity degrades women into second-rate citizens. Yet if the myth that domesticity is inevitably natural fails, just as it fails when Nora leaves the dollhouse, every man-woman story could be told in a different way. As Emma Goldman put it in 1914 in *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama*: "when Nora closes behind her the door of her

doll's house, she opens wide the gate of life for woman, and proclaims the revolutionary message that only perfect freedom and communion make a true bond between man and woman, meeting in the open, without lies, without shame, free from the bondage of duty". The story of *A Doll's House* is of key importance because the drama plot represents the process of re-vision, developing a new framework for our knowledge about women. This duality provides opportunity for changing cultures and literatures to reflect upon the problem "without a name" through the story of *A Doll's House*. Thus, it is a process of developing a new, democratic vision and the transformation of the prevailing current visions. It "opens wide the gate" for those who wish to depart from the old way of thinking – especially for those who wish to live "the lives of their own".

However useful the idea of re-vision is, one could revise generally known texts only, i.e. the texts of canonized literature and stories. By this, the fundamentally democratic and movement-based feminist thinking re-establishes the "Canon", their own framework for thinking, which in fact has already become their "own" canon. *A Doll's House* by

Ibsen is part of this canon, with all its antidemocratism.

Nora's story is a current topic these days, since after the Eastern European collapse of the "Statist feminism" in 1989, the cult of domesticity – which did survive the era of equalizing policy in dollhouses, families – and its supporting ideologies all re-emerged from the dollhouses and penetrated into state politics. Now therefore, we shall resort to new methods in finding stories that help us counter this new and powerful tendency. Yet, this search should be free from the consumers' approach. We should not go on with our search as we do it when we try to find "a new dress" in a shop – only to realize at home that we bought something very similar to several other dresses already hanging in our wardrobe. The notion of re-vision could help a lot in understanding and transforming the standards of the heterosexual desire economy.

According to Rich, the process of re-vision is an inevitably collective action. It may not be placed on the level of individual suffering and stories, as by this, we would create the individual of the consumer society, who is as fragile as Nora was

after she closed the door, and spent the first night alone, without her husband and children. The re-vision of the past could establish a new framework for understanding reality, though this framework is new only from a certain aspect. Thus, being the Hungarian readers of Ibsen, we could become Nora's sisters when we follow her in her wish to become a "human being", and not a wife and a mother before all else. These roles are contradicting each other in a world built on inequalities and lies, i.e. in *A Doll's House*, and in spite of the more than hundred-year-old European emancipation movement, this dollhouse still exists with all its lies.

When interpreting Ibsen in Hungary, we shall not forget that in present-day Hungary many women suffer in a dollhouse different from Nora's. Tens of thousands of our women compatriots wish they could escape not from the shackles of privileged, white, middle-class families, but from the embarrassing poverty of economic inequalities. In a letter of 1875, Ibsen wrote to Brandes: "I only ask; my task is not to answer". Therefore, we should offer an even larger scope of opportunities in the future so that Nora's sisters could

raise questions to themselves and to others in order to use the power of questions in transforming our everyday life for the sake of "humankind".

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