

# Bjørnson and Women's Social Emancipation

Tove Bakke

**Abstract** In his writings and discourses, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson focuses on issues of equal rights, and has strong ideas about the rights for freedom and equal treatment for each and every individual, which results in a logical consequence: the appeal for equal rights for women. Through his outstanding gifts both as a poet and a speaker, and his extensive political participation in the world that surrounded him, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson made his ideas an extraordinary impact on social problems in general and women's emancipation issues in particular. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while the literary current changed from Romanticism to Realism, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's literary writings also developed from more romantic and poetic stories and dramas to realistic writings, and therefore demonstrated the realistic significance then and even today.

**Key words** Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson; women's emancipation; sexual morals; realism  
**Author** Tove Bakke, formerly literary critic, now mainly a free lance translator of fiction and poetry. Till 2010, worked at the Arts Council Norway, literary section. Email: tovebakke@hotmail.com

“I wonder what I shall get to see on the other side of the mountain ...”  
“Out, I want to get out!”

These lines, as I remember from one of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson poems, and from a rural story of his that I read as a child, have always been the guidelines of my life. Whether the citations are absolutely correct or not, does not matter, what counts is the essence: To get out there and see the world! This motto is evoked in me every time I hear the name Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, who was a passionate writer, an emotional poet and an extraordinarily gifted speaker. He was also well read and very active in the contemporary debate.

In his writings and discourses, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson focuses on issues of equal rights, discrimination, language, the nation, and the importance of the rural cultural heritage. He had strong ideas about the right to freedom and equal treatment for each and every individual. Equal rights for women is a logical consequence of this attitude, because equality between the sexes means equality in society. As an independent woman in a free, democratic society, I see myself as a result of his work. This acknowledgement shall be my approach to him here: I have chosen to talk about Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson in view of female emancipation, which cannot be done without referring to the ideas about this question in his lifetime, mainly the last two thirds of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and I shall also briefly refer to the situation for women in our country

today.

In the early days of Norwegian women's liberation and women's rights movement, there were many strong and outstanding spokeswomen working actively for changes in contemporary Norway. Already as a quite young boy, 16 years of age, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson got to know an important feminist in his home town of Molde, and is believed to have been greatly influenced by her. He was already at this young age more than ordinarily interested in politics and society. He also read a lot, and got fuel for his ideas from abroad.

Though in all his life he would be fighting for a modern view on women, he knew equality of gender could not be achieved from one day to the next—the society had to change accordingly. At seventy (around 1900), Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson said that it was always clear to him that “the great reforms to make society a better one, shall come to nothing as long as women are not included in this strife. (···) And that now, (at the beginning of the 20th century) signs are showing that he was right in his belief in them.”<sup>1</sup> One of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's great achievements was to forward the idea of equal rights for women in the consciousness of people in general.

### **Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's Influence in Modern Times**

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's influence can not be neglected in Modern times. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as a general rule, most young Norwegians take women's equality for granted, and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's writings as something from a remote past. But in many ways he was very modern! And the past is not as far away as we often think. Young Norwegians whose parents immigrated from poor countries to Norway during the last 3 – 4 decades, even today recognize the actuality of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's short stories from the Norwegian rural areas 150 years ago. The stories often speak about young people's identity and dreams, of the rights and equal worth of all human beings. Also women have the right to follow their vocation. In Norway, women got the right to vote 1913, three years after his death, while those in Great Britain only got it in 1928, US and Canada 1929 and France as late as 1944!

What is the situation of women in Norway of today?

Sixty-four percent of women attend college studies and university. Since year 2000, the percentage of men and woman in university and college studies were the same. After year 2000, the percentage of women has been rising every year. It is also interesting to see that many young women of minority background—Pakistan, Turkey, Viet Nam, Somalia now are students at a high level, and very accomplished, too. In Norwegian political life, after the most recent state and municipal elections, 40% of the representatives in parliament are women, and 50% of the members of government. But even today, equal pay check for equal work is not the rule, and various other problems of the kind are still to be solved. Just to mention it, at the same time Norwegian women give birth to more children than the women in any other European country.

So what does all this have to do with Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, a 19<sup>th</sup> century writer?

First, a brief survey of history will give you a picture of Europe at his time:

Between 1848 – 52 half Europe was moved by nationalist and liberating revolutions, but as we know, most attempts at social change were crushed by the bourgeoisie. The years from 1848 and onwards is a period of great confusion, great changes, wars, industrial development, and there was the Paris Commune in 1871.

Society goes through radical, even total change: with industrial rising, trade, the modern world—capitalism, labour movements, bourgeois growth and wealth, cities in expansion, progress of science and techniques like electricity, the telephone. It is also a period of progress, and of “peace and prosperity”. Modernity was the sign of the times, much like it is now (particularly here in Shanghai): The French poet Arthur Rimbaud claimed that “il faut être moderne”, “we must be modern”.

### **Emancipation of Women**

Following the French Revolutions in 1789 and 1848, and the American Declaration of Independence 1776, of course, there was a growing consciousness regarding the role of women in many countries. In Norway, these ideas particularly gained ground after Norway got our own Constitution in 1814, after 400 years as a Danish colony. Of course, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, was not the only person to forward gender equality and equality in society. But with his intelligence, knowledge, his rhetorical gift and capability of conveying his thoughts and ideas through emotional channels, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was appealing to a very broad public. Apparently, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was much inspired by the British philosopher Mr. John Stuart Mill and his collaborators Mrs. Harriet Taylor, and (later) also Ms. Helen Taylor. John Stuart Mill was very respectful of their skills and saw them as his equals, partly co-authors of books and writings in his name. *On Liberty* (1858) and *The Subjection of Women* (1869), were translated and well-known in the Nordic countries at the time. So were the works of other central thinkers. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson admired Stuart Mill's way of having long and strong professional relationships to women. He himself had lifelong friendships with women, and learned a lot from both them and his wife Karoline, views that he eagerly conveyed to his audience.

### **A Norwegian as a Scandinavian, a European and a Man of the World**

As mentioned before, his century was a century of enormous changes in Europe and the western world. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson fought against suppression of people and peoples all his life.

In Norway, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson fought for national independence, i. e. human independence.

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was a great poet. He wrote our national anthem *Ja vi elsker dette landet/Yes, we love this country*, which speaks mainly of freedom, peace and nature. It is nothing like the French hymn, *La Marseillaise*, which is a bloody violent story! But then France had a more violent development than little Norway.

## Changes in Art: from Romanticism to Realism

As society changes, so does art. What were the literary trends in the Europe that influenced Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's writing? The coming of realism played a most important role.

In literature, the change from romanticism to realism is strong: in their novels, writers like Balzac, Flaubert, Stendhal and Tolstoy showed to their readers the world that surrounded them. And of course, soon realism came to dominate all arts.

The first realistic novel in Norway was written by a woman, Camilla Collett: *The District Governor's Daughters*, published in 1855. She belonged to the more bourgeois class, but wrote about society in general. Some of her main themes were the consequences of being married against one's will, the consequences of illegal abortions, the bad conditions for workers and especially female workers. Now, does this seem very far from today's reality in most parts of the world? After the death of her husband, though, Camilla herself was quite poor and had to give her three eldest children to be raised by relatives. Her writings had a huge impact, though, and she is a classic that is still read.

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's literary writings also developed from more romantic and poetic stories and dramas to realism. He often wrote about women, and his first novel, *Synnøve Solbakken* (1857) is a story of a farmer's daughter who wants to marry below her social rank.

*The Fisherman's Daughter* is a story of liberation for a young girl who breaks through small town conventions to realize herself and her dream of being an actress. As to who was the model of this young woman, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson always answered: But don't you see, that girl is myself.

His melodramatic epic poem *Bergljot* (1870) is about the saga heroine and wife of a famous viking.

In his novel *Magnhild*, which was published in 1877, he forwards the issue of woman's right to divorce and lets the wife leave an arranged marriage based on lies – not at all on love. And this, ladies and gentlemen, was actually two years before Ibsen's Nora leaves her husband and family, an action which as we know, has had a huge impact on society all over the world, not least in China. Nora leaves the house, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's Magnhild leaves her country and her continent.

Not to forget, as early in 1865 Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson had written the first of his plays that focuses on the lack of freedom for woman, in his drama *The Newly Wed*, that was actually performed in Shanghai Theatre Academy in 2009. And this drama's topic is the constraints of tradition, and young bourgeois women's loyalty to their parents.

Some of the themes are of course less interesting to us today than to the audience of that period. But 100 – 150 years is not a very long time in the history of mankind. and in his basic thinking about equality in society and between the sexes, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson can seem surprisingly modern and up to date. I'll also remind you that the theme of modern woman and her situation in society was a constant pre-occupation to his fellow writers of the time.

As a dramatic, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson is part of the Scandinavian realist theatre.

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's *Leonarda* (1873) is one of the first of a large series of women in the realist Scandinavian theatre, and the expression of a theme and of an epoca. *Leonarda* is divorced, and the general double morals pushes her to leave her country for America.

I'll just mention a few of the more internationally known women heroines:

Ibsen's *Nora* (1879) is very sure of what she wants, in a world where appearances are important: "Breaking out from her world, breaking up with her world." And Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890) is opposite to *Nora*, Hedda is fighting against her society and becomes a victim of her time. She is manipulative, living in a world of lies and inner emptiness.

Normally, she should be called Hedda Tesman, after her husband. Gabler was her name before marrying. But according to Ibsen, his (quote) "intention giving her this name, was to suggest that the personality of Hedda should be seen more as her father's daughter than her husband's wife".<sup>2</sup> This play is actually on in Oslo this season, directed by 29 year old Peer Perez Øian. It is his debut as a director, and he focuses on Hedda's "free choice", and it's eventual consequences.

And finally there is *Miss Julie* (1888) by August Strindberg from Sweden, a country with an aristocratic tradition that Norway does not have, about the aristocrat woman and the male servant, a naturalist play about class, battle of the sexes, lust, power etcetera.

But to get back to my main topic, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and woman's emancipation, I would like to take a look at the effects of another play by this writer, from as early as 1883.

In 1880 – 81 he stayed in the US, where he also came into contact with US Women's movement, and among other things visited an important and impressive Women's College.

Two years later, in Paris, actually, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson finished his play *The Gauntlet* whose topic is sexual morals, specifically sex before marriage and the general attitude in society that a woman must be "pure" before marriage, whereas a man's sexual relationships were accepted. The main female character, Svava, throws a glove in the face of her fiancée. (Throwing a glove/gauntlet is traditionally a very strong challenge to another person, particularly a man.) She has the courage not to accept that he has had a relationship to a married woman. She is soon to be married herself, and in her opinion he, like she, has to be pure before marriage.

*The Gauntlet* was a drama written with the intention to create a debate, and so it did, there was a huge controversy also in the neighboring countries, called the Glove Fight. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson wanted equal rights for woman and man in society, and accordingly, he wanted the same ethics for woman and man. (In this, I'll remind you, we are mostly talking of the bourgeois, middle class. In the countryside, the girls were freer, and opened their bed room windows to the boy they preferred ...) The drama thus attacks the widely accepted double morals and the writer of the drama was instantly attacked from various sides for his ideas: by the radical liberals for being too conservative; by the conservative Christians for being too radical! The Church

was particularly critical to the play. Now, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson himself was in favor of monogamy and family. But he saw this as a means to ensure a stable society. And he saw the stable, long term relationship and the family as the best way to achieve this. But he, opposite the Church, wanted this to be based on rational thought and knowledge, not on Christian morals or religious standards. It was also said, during these fierce discussions across the Nordic country borders, that he was anti-woman, anti-freedom, conservative and in fact suppressive! So all in all, he was criticized for forwarding the exact opposite of what he himself wanted, which was freedom and equality! How could this be? At least it shows that Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was not a conformist. And he not only liked, but seemed to thrive on controversy. Luckily, his main opponents outside the Church—and now I talk about intellectuals, artists, bohemians—did not have the support in society that he had. And, they did not have his outstanding capacity for conveying ideas in a way that people could emotionally understand and accept.

### **The Backbone in Fighting**

Along with his contacts with woman's associations, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was constantly working for better conditions for children, working class, and women. And in this "glove fight" about morality, he had on his side the woman's association, who liked his way of considering family as the pillar of society. Behind him were also the social and socialist movements that wanted to strengthen family values as a means of bettering the conditions of the poor people and the workers.

Now, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was never a spectator, he was not sitting on a mountain top creating theories, he lived in the middle of everything. He was, by nature, both a politician and a poet. In both ways, he was an extremely active part of society. He loved standing in the middle of the fight—any fight as long as they were about justice and respect. He was immensely interested in what was going on, he was always teaching and propagating his ideas, defending his ideals, constantly fighting for human rights and against political subjection in several European countries. And his works were translated to other languages during his lifetime. This fits perfectly into what we today would call his image as a global person. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson travelled constantly, always wondering what he would get to see on the other side of the next mountain.

So how about his personal life in all this activity and debating?

It is not always easy to combine ideas and real life. He had a strong wife, Karoline. And she had her own thoughts about society and morals that she expressed very clearly. She, too, was of the opinion that women were underestimated in society, and she was especially concerned by the life of women in the farms. And Norway was a country of farming at that time, mostly very small and poor farms which, by the way, led to a massive emigration mainly to the North America. And Karoline was patient and wise. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was impatient, easily excited. He poured out masses of articles and letters that Karoline would then have to put in a proper shape—and if

she found him too wild, too hotheaded, that he was writing before thinking—she just let his writings lie for a couple of days so that he could calm down and have a second look before he sent them. She was his reason. If he had had the mobile phone and internet possibilities of today, he probably would have gotten a lot more enemies!

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was loved by many. At his funeral in Oslo/Christiania a hundred years ago, many thousands followed him to his grave, among them a lot of women and children. 50 years after his death, grateful delegations from foreign countries still showed up at his home Aulestad to show their respect and honour the memory of an extraordinarily generous and compassionate fighter for justice, wherever it was lacking and for whoever had not got it.

### **【Notes】**

1. See Edvard Hoem, "Vennskap i storm - Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson 1875 - 1892." *BB Biography Volume II*, which is to be published in December 2010, Oslo.
2. See Teatro realista escandinavo, Editorial Pueblo y Educacion, Ciudad de Habana, Cuba, 1972/1985.

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