



FICTION

The First Session

NABILA MURSHED

It was a mild Fall afternoon. The sky was clear and the sunlight was pouring into a medium sized office with floor length windows at 86 Nutt Road in Phoenixville, PA. My office was minimally decorated with some artificial plants. There was a three seater sofa and two single seaters

my last patient, Alina Kumar for her first therapy session. She entered the office quickly, seated herself on the couch and began speaking right away.

"When he told me, in late December, I sat transfixed, listening with rapt attention to his brand new love story of heart meeting heart, mind meeting mind, soul meeting soul and the imminent meeting of bodies, in the idyllic continent, far away from me, his petite, unendowed, average wife! I could not move as I wanted to hear more and more about this amazing union of oneness, even as I felt the crushing of my soul and the poisoning of my blood. I took all of it in as I love good stories.

"To my surprise, I found myself liking my husband's goddess. He made me believe that she has been abundantly endowed with all that is impressive in a person; beauty, brains, sterling accomplishments and a winsome personality. When I looked her up on social media I could see why my husband fell for her. She seemed to be the kind of person people flock to.

"In my eyes, my husband is good looking, smart, fiercely independent and successful. He is a self made man. I like that about him the most. He loves with passion and can hate with disdain. He attracts people with his wit and altruism. Though it may sound strange, he can be merciless and avenging. God help those who try to tame his free spirit!

"In his eyes we are Jack Sprats, which was not funny but maddening. It is true that he wouldn't have done what I did after the bombshell disclosure. He wouldn't have become the unwitting co-creator of my romantic saga, forgetting himself, forgetting everyone else in his life. He wouldn't have read copiously

and shared frantically all about love, marriage and relationships with me. He wouldn't make any crazy attempts to win me back. But I did."

Palpable shame quietly engulfed the room.

"So, when he came to break off our three decade knot, all he could do was to thank me for helping them mould their union perfectly. He heartlessly disclosed that I enabled them to find answers to their unsolvable problems. He confided that they read my mails to him, together. That enraged me as I felt betrayed and cheated all over again. I couldn't contain myself. I dumped my hot ashes on him complacently as I felt I was plundered from something sacred. How dare he do this? The letters were meant for us, not for them! I felt like serving his head on a platter to the hungry tigers in the zoo! That was my intellectual property! That was my copyrighted work!"

There was an exhausted silence after the long outpour. Alina wandered off somewhere. I sat quietly, waiting for her to resume.

"You know, I regret being a Robin Hood. How could I not have known? I had completely tuned out that he had repeatedly shoved me off with one excuse after another, as long as I can remember. It had slipped my mind that he never connected emotionally with me all those years. So, when he physically moved out after our children graduated from college, he could dampen my earnest chase with that 'I have moved on' insistence. He reiterated that he waited for a lot of things to happen before he could tell me the truth. He had assumed that I could not live without him. It didn't feel good to hear that. It hurt my pride. He said he knew instinctively that someday he would find his serendipity.

When he did, he would not let her go. He said he won. I say we lost. We selfishly hurt our children by staying in a marriage that was half-hearted, one sided and so volatile.

"But I want you to know, Nabila, I married with feelings and a dream about having a marriage that people admire without envy, even though it was an arranged marriage. The matchmaker who was a trusted face in both our families, could confidently entice me with a well-spun tale of mutual happiness and compatibility. So, when I first beheld him I agreed to this arrangement thoughtlessly, as I arrogantly believed that we would get along. That was a mistake."

So said Alina, sitting on the couch, closest to me and sizing me up, eager to be heard, eager to be understood. I spoke for the first time in the session.

"What would you like from our journey together?"

"Kindness," Alina blurted out without batting an eyelid.

It was time for us to wrap up. Her forty-five minutes were up ten minutes ago.

When she left, scheduling another session at the same time on the same day the following week, I summed us up. We had legerity. I liked the narrator and analyst in her. She would like the listener and the sapiosexual in me. We are a good fit. I believe I can help her. I, too, was once scorched. In that moment of seeking and giving kindness, in our first meeting, I already felt the pang of our separation. There would come a time when Alina would not need my support and service anymore. She will heal and move on. And then we will become memories in each other's lives in the distant future.

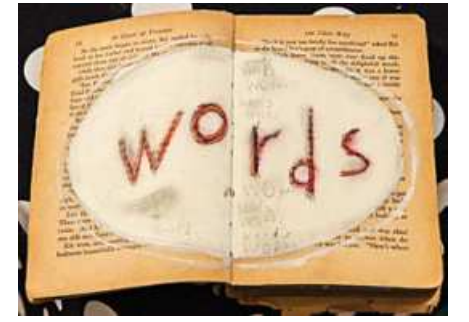
Nabila Murshed is a psychotherapist in private practice in the USA.



POETRY

Words

RADHIKA MENON



Words are strangers
On a hospital bed
Fighting for life.

Words are food crumbs
on a footpath.

Words are blankets
For a beggar.

Words march on with candles and torches
Singing lullabies of the outcast.

Words cross borders
Without panicking of surgical strikes,
Words are not afraid
Of the government stooges.

They sign petitions
And give speeches that disturb the sensx.

Words don't build fences
Instead they build bridges
For a better path,
An impartial law.
While others push them
Into concentration camps
And behind prison bars
Words are you and I
On a boat with no oar.

Radhika Menon is a content writer and freelance copy editor from Kerala. When she's not writing, you can find her binge watching her way into the world of witches, gypsies and dragons.



arranged rectangularly without a table in between. The desk was pushed way back to the wall by the entrance with my credentials displayed on it. There was nothing in the office that betrayed confidentiality. I opened the door to greet

REVIEWS

Beyond the Rebel Poet: Nazrul's Versatility

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

Kazi Nazrul Islam: Selections, Volume 2, Niaz Zaman edited, writers.ink, 2020.

A bland, matter-of-fact statement about Kazi Nazrul Islam would be that he is the National Poet of Bangladesh. Not an honour to be sneezed at, but Nazrul was/is a bit more than that. More than a bit more. Niaz Zaman, educationist, prolific writer, and prominent in Bangladeshi literary circles, in conjunction with The Reading Circle group and an assemblage of generally competent translators, has compiled the more than a bit more in two volumes: the book under review, and its first volume. And thank goodness for the two. Nazrul's genius deserves to be recognized beyond the boundaries of the Bangla language. The translation of his myriad works in the global lingua franca, English, should go some way towards familiarizing him outside Bangla.

The first volume restricted itself, appropriate considering Nazrul's prime claim to fame being that of a poet, to selections from his poems; the second deals with his prose in various forms. And there is a tangential reference here as well. After all, as Niaz Zaman notes in her Introduction, Nazrul's "first printed work was a short story, 'Baundeler Atmakahini,' published in *Saogat*, May 1919." He went on to write nineteen more short stories, eight of which (including "Baundeler Atmakahini," translated by Nuzhat Amin Mannan as "The Autobiography of a Vagabond") are presented in this volume in the section "Short Stories." Besides this grouping, there are three others: "Letters" (containing ten entries), "Essays" (twelve), and "Speeches" (two): making it a total of thirty two pieces under four broad heads. Significantly, attesting to the possibility of fresh perspective relating to the translation, Zaman states, "As with Volume 1, a number of the pieces were translated earlier. Most of the translations, however, were specially commissioned for this volume." Furthermore, an extensive glossary and notes section has been appended at the end of the thirty two presentations, and it should be helpful, particularly for those unfamiliar with Bengali/Indian society and customs.

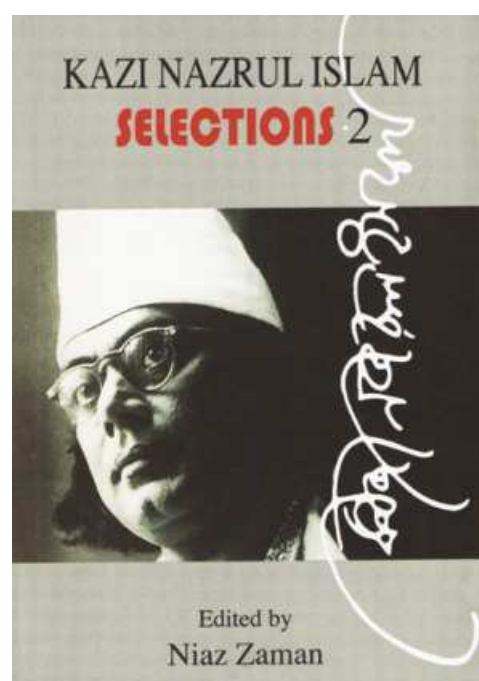
The Letters section opens with "the first extant mail of Kazi Nazrul Islam" (editor).

Written on a postcard on 23 July 1917, it was addressed to one Moulvi Abdul Gafur, and translated by Mohammad Shafiqul Islam. Its relevance lies in only its chronological sequence. The next two, written to two well-known personalities in Indian, specifically Bengal, history, attest to the poet's thoughts and queries regarding life and objectives as a writer. To Muzaffar Ahmed, he had recorded his indebtedness to him as a budding writer: "If you keep inspiring me this way, I'll really prove to be a great poet and writer one day." Well, Nazrul did, and the rest is history, but going by his statement, Muzaffar Ahmed had something to do with it, if only as an inspiration. This letter has been competently translated by Mohammad Shafiqul Islam, as has the next one, to Principal Ibrahim Khan, where he expounds on great literature having to be secular: "If it's true literature, it belongs to all nations. But it must have its own distinct religion as well. Literature may be written on the ideals of Islam, but not on its scripture.

"To successfully achieve a lasting influence in Bangla literature, in the first place, we have to expel the present plodding heaviness that afflicts our writing and bring in a lightness and ease of expression. Literature which is inert and lifeless will bring us no benefits, nor will such writing achieve permanence. There are few writers in Bangla, except for Rabindranath, who project this kind of liberated lightness in their choice of words."

Why only Islam? I believe no one should create literature on any religious scriptures of the world. The true essence of Islam includes humanity, democracy, universal brotherhood and equality.

The next three letters presented are



addressed to Professor Qazi Motahar Hossain, and all have been competently translated by Nashid Kamal. Unlike the deferential ones to Muzaffar Ahmed and Ibrahim Khan these read like a friend writing to another of a similar age. In fact, the first is addressed to Friend! And the next two to Motihar, an obvious pun of familiarity on the name Motahar. His literary impulses were never far from the surface and, in fact, he might have harboured notions of attaining greatness as a bard or, at least, yearned to be one. He expressed his feelings to Hossain: "Why do I feel Shelley and Keats coursing through my blood?" He longed to be with the best, and Shelley and Keats were, and continue to be, right up there with the best. In a separate letter he harangues his friend, a Mathematics don, on a bewildering topic, the education of women in one particular subject: "I understand you. But I cannot tolerate that a woman --- an epitome of beauty --- should fall prey to mathematics." Huh? Say what! And thereby hangs a tale of love. Nazrul praises Hossain as "Selfless, soft, sensitive, lover --- but you wish to hide these facets of yours," but he teaches Mathematics,

and Fazilatunnessa was a Mathematics student at Dhaka (then spelt Dacca) University. And Nazrul developed a crush on her. That is one whole fascinating story, glimpses of which may be gleaned from the third letter to Hossain. There is also a letter from Nazrul to Fazilatunnessa in this collection, translated by Shafiqul Islam, where he expresses himself this way to her: "There is just a touch of carelessness in its writing."

In "The Autobiography of a Vagabond" (Baundeler Atmakahini), Nazrul encapsulates a period in history's viewpoint regarding the requisites of a suitable bride (and other social norms): "Young men these days quite shamelessly choose their own wives. Even young men darker than ebony or with rough and crude features look for brides who have complexions white as milk in which red *alta* has been mixed, eyes like a doe's, a waist like a lion's, a face like the moon, a voice like the *kokil's*, a deportment like a swan's. She must have delicately small feet, for if such a circumstance arises when one needs to cajole this precious creature by touching her feet when she is sulking, God forbid that those feet should be as hard and large as Godadhor's aunt's."

"The Rakhshashi," translated by Zerin Alam, is an indictment on the status of women *vis-à-vis* men in those days. The afflicted woman resignedly laments: "If I had done what my husband had, and if he had murdered me, men would have said nothing. The women would have agreed with them. Yes, this is what evil women deserve. Women see that men can get away with anything." Much time has passed from when Nazrul wrote this till now, but not a huge lot has changed from his observation. There is still much ways to go before women's rights are brought up to par with men in our society (and in so many others).

There are quite a few serious essays in this collection. "Untouchability" (*Chhutmargo*), translated by Debjani Sengupta, contains this cryptic line with a lot of implied ramifications: "Untouchability is followed by false practitioners of religion." "Muslims in Bangla Literature" (*Bangla Shahitiye Mussalman*), translated by Shirin Hasanat Islam, contains

these profound thoughts: "To successfully achieve a lasting influence in Bangla literature, in the first place, we have to expel the present plodding heaviness that afflicts our writing and bring in a lightness and ease of expression. Literature which is inert and lifeless will bring us no benefits, nor will such writing achieve permanence. There are few writers in Bangla, except for Rabindranath, who project this kind of liberated lightness in their choice of words." World Literature Today, translated by Syed Sajjad Husain, is an interesting essay. I Am a Soldier, translated by Ayesha Kabir, contains lines that depict the essence of soldiering: "O bitter bitter force within me, blazing fury, poisonous torture! O my perpetually cruel, harsh soldier-soul, let me never belittle you with the temptation of praise. Let me never have the hypocrisy to call you a god. Let me present myself as I am. Down the ages, victory to me, the beast, the soldier!" Translated by Shirin Hasanat Islam, The Temple and the Mosque exemplifies Nazrul's secular spirit: "I hear the call of the *azan* from the mosque, the sound of the conch from the temple. They rise together, upwards to the throne of the Creator. I see the entire heaven reverberating with joy."

One of the selected pieces, Deposition of a Political Prisoner, translated by Sajed Kamal, contains these thoughts on the unjust nature of colonialism: "Today, India is subjugated. Its people are slaves. This is the absolute truth. In this kingdom, to call a slave a slave, to call injustice, injustice, is sedition.... Today, if instead of India being subjugated, England had been subjugated by India and if the defenseless, oppressed people of England, like the people of India, had been anxious to liberate their own motherland, and, if at that time, I were the judge and, like me, this judge, charged with sedition, were to be tried by me, then, this judge standing in the defendant's dock, would have said what I am saying and in the same way." Kazi Nazrul Islam was altogether something else.

Shahid Alam is a thespian; Professor, Media and Communication Department, Independent University of Bangladesh.