

A Fierce Poet in a Beautiful Mind

by Nilratan Halder

POETS are a special breed in that they feel intensely and react strongly. The sights and sounds all around, the continuous contact with nature and the world outside, the wonder of becoming a part of the on-going drama — all combine together to variously appeal to the poet in a man. Yet, as the cliché goes, not everyone is a poet but some are. And to feel the idea, not all poets feel the same way, respond alike and with the same intensity.

A frebrand, Kazi Nazrul Islam is a poet of his class. Quite atypical in Bangla literature, he brought in a surfeit of elan never known before or after. He has perhaps more life force than the strongest of human bodies could ever contain within. Not surprisingly, a man so full of life is bound to experience the both extremes of sorrow and ecstasy. An abundance of creative power and of life never taught him to be prudent, rather he had always been an extravagant in spending money or merit.

Sensuousness and passion together had a major share in the make-up of the poetic mind of Nazrul. This was bound to happen. He knew life from a close quarter and with a remarkable ease he overcame the barriers which were many. The fact that such a man would live every moment of his life as vigorously as possible is indisputable. Actually, his lack of care often landed him in avoidable troubles. But little did he think of leading a smooth, disciplined and frugal life. He was destined to be a bohemian and a troubadour in one self.

A romantic all through his life, Nazrul was sometimes guided by his impulses. It is this impulsive romanticism that came out spontaneously — of course with an imprint of rawness at times — to fashion his life and at least some of his poems. The spontaneous overflows may have accounted for compromising with the poetic finesse, but they do one remarkable thing. This is laying bare a mind of incomparable beauty and sincerity — a quality seldom encountered in our literature. Thus for the poet the difference between Fazilatunnesa and a betelnut tree is

obliterated. The impassioned outpouring of his heart in both cases reveals the limitless capacity of his heart for love.

Nazrul's desire to create a paradise in between him and a betelnut tree can never be suspect much the same way his first love in a village of Comilla or the later flame of his heart in the shape of Fazilatunnesa cannot be. Call it infidelity or what you will but never question the poet's sincere utterances. He never pretended to be a moralist nor an ascetic. The ingeniousness of his heart is a treasure trove in Bangla literature. It was during his courtship with Fazilatunnesa — which unfortunately was one-sided — that the poet wrote several classic letters to Kazi Motahar Hossain, cousin to Fazilatunnesa.

Indeed, Nazrul was at his poetic best in the prose of those letters. His infatuation and despair have received such a poignant expression in those letters that it has prompted someone to compile them together to bring out a book titled *Nazrul Jibane Premier Ek Adhyaya* (a love chapter in the life of Nazrul). Incidentally, Nazrul discovered in an English poet, Robert Browning, the same deep feeling for a woman, which finds its perfect echo in one of the latter's poems. But our poet here wrongly quotes his counterpart of the Fair Albion: So very sad and bad and mad it was/But then how sweet it was. Actually Browning's couplet was: How sad and bad and mad it was/But then how sweet it was.

Misquoting however in no way diminishes the depth of our poet's feeling. And to think of him as a love-sick would be equally wrong. He was true to his self, right up to the moment of his conscious living. This openness is not only manifest in his dealings with hearts. Even more prominently has he demonstrated his pre-occupation with the man's inner quality. A sworn enemy of religious fundamentalism and sham rituals, Nazrul excelled in his most impeccable type of humanism. Religious differences, ideological obtuseness and shameless exhibition of moral and intellectual superi-

ority and senseless social sanctions therefore drew the poet's fiercest criticisms.

Clearly, Nazrul never sought *nirvana* nor the life of a recluse. He did indeed mean to stand by the oppressed. His was a role of a crusader and all through his active life he gladly played that part with a sense of unflinching commitment. Obviously, the poet drew wrath of the zealots but never did he back out from his position. Indeed, his fight was on two fronts. He was an epitome of the protest against the colonial power on the one hand and, on the other, he fought for the decolonisation of the collective mind. Beleaguered by religious bindings, social taboos and superstitions and above all a sense of inferiority complex, a Bangalee or Indian mind of his time — or as of now — is a weird jumble of sense perception. Nazrul was the first to make direct hit to that.

On this count, Nazrul was more a social reformer than many who professed to have associated their fate with that special area. Rabindranath's quiet and intelligent persuasion was not for all. The Indian — more precisely Bengal — society waited to be struck with the ferocity that was Nazrul's hall mark. And he did deliver it as ruthlessly as possible, with scant respect either for the establishment or the vested interest groups. Indeed, it was most effectively dealt with.

All this is however not to dismiss the mellowness, the sweetness and the iridescent quality of the heart within. True, he cannot be ruthless like Nazrul who has no compassion of Christ-like expanse. In this sense Nazrul as a man was no different from the poet he was. In fact, the poetic self and the lover of mankind got an agreeable fusion in him. He remained true to this happy blend of character all through his life. So, by remembering this beautiful soul, we add nothing to his inimitable quality. What however we can do, specially at a time when bigotry and illogical social sanctions are posing a great threat to our secular and progressive social make-up, is to rededicate ourselves to the high ideals he espoused in his lifetime.

If Only We Loved Him

by Waheedul Haque

KAZI Nazrul Islam placed love above all other attributes of man. A revolutionary in conviction and in all he did and aspired to do, love was something to him much higher than revolution and patriotism, justice and fairness, creativity and sacrifice. He proclaimed in resounding words he had come to this world to love and in return to be loved. And till his last moments of sanity, he believed while he had never for a moment faltered and failed in giving love, he was withdrawing from the world in abysmal disappointment — in untranslatable *teebro abhiman*, that is — as his love had not been returned in any measure.

There was a nineteenth century fictional work by Chandrashekar Mukhopadhyay called 'Udbhranta Prem' — Love Gone Berserk — which by universal agreement dripped raw emotion and was enough to consign the heads of all young people to eternal damnation. We of the twentieth century think that we have known a far more intense epitome of both love and emotion than 'Udbhranta Prem'. Haven't we known Nazrul and seen how that some pales before the life and loves, the struggles and achievements of Nazrul? And did we not almost dismiss Nazrul's valedictory words of disappointment as penned in a feverish fit of emotion — the outpouring of an overwrought man at his tether's end — bitter, bitter, bitter?

On this the 95th year of Nazrul's birth, 52nd after he all but physically died and 18th after he was interred inside the Dhaka University Mosque compound (*Masjidi pashe amara kabir dibo bhai, jaeno gorer theke muazziner azan shunte paai* — bury me by the side of a mosque so that from my grave can I hear the muazzin's call for prayer — was one of his celebrated Islamic songs in which, unsuspected by communal zealots, he went the whole hog on the way to the *bhakti* cult of the subcontinent). It would be a good idea to look around in search of at least one soul in this land where he has been named the

national poet who indeed thinks of him with love. He has been made into a mascot by fundamentalist goons who would never read him nor listen to him lest their delusion should pass. Nazrul, a mascot or a presiding spirit for communal intolerance and arrogance? If there was any who ever loved him, this should have been enough for him or her to shout denunciation sending shivers down the spine of the culprits. Not a voice has been heard in protest over the long 47 post-partition years denouncing this act of desecration of a man's whole being.

It was the then Pakistan which started the mean ploy of standing an evidently Muslim, Nazrul against a reputedly Hindu Rabindranath in the hope of cutting the umbilical chord that bound the Bengali Muslims to the great heritage of Bengali literature which is what nurtures Bengality in who is only a Bengali speaker. They thought by diminishing Rabindranath that chord could be effectively cut. Nazrul wanted all his life to be known

by his identity of a human being and not of only a Muslim. He was scorn of everything true and real, everything that spoke of his humanity and of his strivings to hold high the man-in-society and in history — and was made into a puffed up bag of a crudely false 'Muslim-only' stereotype.

Worse, he was made to serve ends he had all his life battled to oppose. Colonial exploitation, autocratic dictation from above, discrimination and privileges, curtailment of man's liberty and fettering the mind of man with shackles of prejudice and ignorance — these were things he fought against with all his being. And precisely these were things he was used by Pakistan to underwrite and promote — a tool, almost a stool-pigeon, for those enemies of culture and history and society in their wily designs to perpetuate their hold on the Bengali people. Nazrul was pronouncedly socialist — a diehard believer in social, economic and political equality of all men — in his political persuasion. He was an egalitarian bordering dangerously on being an anarchist.

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The Poetics and Politics of Resistance and Opposition

by Azfar Hussain

THE history of Bengali literature is predominantly one of resistance and opposition to forces and factors, mostly alien and oppressive. Yes, the history of literature, in general, tends to be one of resistance and opposition in that creative writers with characteristic dissatisfaction and with a sense of inadequacy tend to traverse beyond the outworn maps of conventions and commonplaces, repeated styles and forms. In other words, in his untrammelled craving for new modes and forms of experiences and articulations, a creative writer unmistakably poses resistance and opposition to the *ethos* of conventions confronting both life and art. Susan Sontag was right when she said: "the history of art is a sequence of successful transgressions."

But, in the case of Bengali literature, *transgressions* made at various points of time in history are not born out of mere *aesthetic* opposition and resistance; they are mostly *political* in the immediate sense of the term. The Bengali language itself had to struggle hard just in order to live on its own, and of course, to grow, and to gather its strength. True, this language had to evolve itself out of its sharp contradictions with colonial realities which, in fact, gave rise to a series of conflicts between Bengali and Sanskrit, between Bengali and Persian, and between Bengali and English. The *pundits* earlier held that Bengali was inferior to Sanskrit, and that to learn Sanskrit meant prestige and grace. On the other hand, the Persian language had its own superiority complex finding expression in the similar logic that Bengali was an inferior language. There were also certain material factors induced by the politics of colonialism itself. Given the realities, it was not Bengali but Persian, and later English, which could ensure one's access to job facilities, economic opportunities, social prestige, and even bureaucratic and political power. Thus, Bengali became the language of the less honoured, the less privileged. During the colonial rule of Pakistan, the Bengali language had to come under one of the most severe forms of colonial attack against which the Language Movement of 1952 posed resistance and opposition even at the expense of life and blood. In fact, in the history of man, no nation other than Bengalees had to pay blood for their own language.

Given such odds and obstacles mostly kept alive by the politics of colonialism over a long period of time, literary activity — which is essentially a linguistic activity as well — is bound to politicise itself in terms of opposition and resistance to those forces which tend to dwarf and diminish the scale and space of Bengali. Vidyasagar and Madhusudan, for example, were keenly aware of their linguistic situation inescapably informed by colonial realities, and they went on to politicise the Bengali language by extending its boundaries and territories. Tagore also tellingly accomplished the task of waging anti-colonial resistance, both at aesthetic and political levels, and discovered and consolidated the hitherto-un-

known potentials of the Bengali language, both in poetry and prose. Nazrul Islam, too, was very much involved in the continuity of such a political and cultural, rather anti-colonial, struggle by continuously exhibiting his opposition and resistance to imperialism, feudalism and capitalism, and to various forms of fundamentalism and communalism — all of which were then very much colonial realities confronting the people in this part of the world.

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Born in a stormy night of 25 May 1899 in a village called Churulja in the Burdwan district of West Bengal, Nazrul started writing poetry in the twenties when Rabindranath Tagore was at the height of his

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poetic career. Nazrul continued to write throughout the thirties, when the so-called 'modernists' were making self-conscious attempts to move out of the orbit of Tagorean aesthetic, style and creed. The consequence of their attempts was their extreme reliance on Eurocentric modernism which could not yield the freedom of the Bengali language, but which, instead, enhanced a spell of what may be called *literary neocolonisation*. But, Nazrul Islam, like Tagore and his predecessors such as Kabir, Nanok, Chitanyaya, Tukaram Chandi Das and Lalon Fakir, was involved in "decolonizing cultural resistance", to use Edward Said's words. Of course, reading Nazrul is an experience of a stylistic signature different from that of Tagore; but, then, like Tagore, Nazrul was trying to evolve his own poetics and politics of resistance and opposition to colonialism. And this, in fact, visibly placed Nazrul in the mainstream of Bengali literature, connecting this poet up with the tradition of protest and revolt which predominantly characterises this very literature.

One can say that Nazrul's resistance to colonialism was, in the first place, sparked off by his acute class-consciousness. Serajul Islam Choudhury, in his *Introducing Nazrul Islam*, justly mentioned that Nazrul Islam "is the only notable writer in the Bengali language who came from the rural proletariat and wrote on its behalf." In *Agnibina* published in 1922 and also in *Bisher Baanshi* (1924), *Bhanga Gaan* (1924), *Samyobadi* (1925), *Sarbahara* (1926), *Panmanasha* (1927) and *Praloy Shikha* (1930), we find Nazrul's unmistakable resistance to colonialism, which, according to Nazrul, is nothing but a consequence of the imperial "will-to-rule-and-loom". Nazrul said, "They loot the land of the others like nothing but robbers". It is interesting to observe that the current post-colonial concept of the binary divide between the 'self' and the 'other' was very much there in the poetic consciousness of Nazrul. However,

Nazrul as an Outstanding Secularist

by S H Imam

NAZRUL'S literary genius was encapsulated within a little over two decades of flowering. Before the neurological disorder overtook him in his early forties and a stony silence befell him he had in that short span of time won millions of admirers across the religious and political divides.

Yet, the sense of loss to the Bengali, subcontinental and even world literary heritage, his having been translated in Hindi, Urdu, Tamil and Russian, has been so tragically immeasurable. The obvious fact is that had he not lost his creative faculty his works would have assumed both epic and conclusive proportions in the end. For, he existed merely bodily for as long as nearly three decades in the grey, mystifying area of total non-communication with the rest of the world — perhaps with himself as well.

But we are celebrating his ninety-fifth birth anniversary and there is so much to celebrate. In a divisive and polarised society where branding and name-calling goes on in reckless abandon, Nazrul's life

and works, so full of contrasts, and yet woven with universal humanism, stand out as a prized heritage to go by.

What a blending of apparently unmixable elements was he — the true hall-mark of a mind set completely free, in quest of not an amorphous truth, but one that is grounded in the soil, full of convictions in the continuity of the crystallised best of traditions. He had built a rapport with Muzaffar Ahmed of communist and humanist fame and wrote and sang *Samjer Gaan*. While he was an active votary of Islamic *gazals*, writing them in Bangla for the first time in that number, he contributed profusely to *Shyama Sangeet*. It was the inner devotional trait of his mind that drew him close to these forms, regardless of any religious connotation to them.

Although he is widely believed to have been at the vanguard of Muslim Renaissance he was unquestionably a secular person to the core of his heart and being. This is one primal contribution of his in the best of traditions in this region. It must be remem-

bered that he remained untouched by communalism through severely testing times.

Therefore, a fragmented eulogy on Nazrul will be patently doing injustice to the versatility of his genius limned on the many-faceted contribution he had made to the literary foliage of this part of the world. In the hall of honour, he has carved a permanent niche for a lore he has left to us, not least of which is the astonishing number of songs, their very strong classical base, and allusions to delectable things of nature in their soothing details, closest to the ornate in architecture. Many of his lyrics are lost, many may have been pirated away but it should be possible nonetheless to piece together a compendium of a Retrospective on him by way of paying the debts we owe him.

During our freedom struggle we adopted his martial song 'Chal, chal, chal/ Urdha gayane baze madal...' as our *Rana Sangeet*. So, he remains deeply linked to independent Bangladesh. It is for us now to do the rest in perpetuating the memory of the Guardian Angel.

Nazrul's poetic consciousness of, and resistance to, colonialism and imperialism were not class-neutral in that the poet always brought to the centre the plight and power of peasants and workers, tellingly exemplified in the works named above. Nazrul, at one point, maintained explicitly that the evils of colonialism and imperialism can best be reflected in the very plight-ridden predicament of the working and peasant classes who, as we see, time and again figure in his poetry. Nazrul also maintained that the real struggle against colonialism and imperialism can draw its energy and *elan* from the united strength of these classes. And

Nazrul's opposition and resistance to capitalism as well. True, during Nazrul's times, capitalism was yet to find its ground in this subcontinent. On the other hand, the feudal relations of productions were encountering threats and challenges, of course only politically. But, then colonialism — a form of imperialism — had its own dynamics and design which encouraged sustenance of feudal values on the one hand, and unsystematically — and for that matter, dangerously — exhibited signs of perverse capitalism on the other, focusing more on mercantile capital than on industrial capital. Nazrul was keenly aware of this complex dynamics of colonial society, and for him, colonialism constituted an active *intertext* of signs and symptoms of feudalism and capitalism which he stood against. Therefore, his resistance to colonialism can also be read as his resistance to capitalism, and vice versa. But, the fact that his political imagination took into account the evils of capitalism was clear enough, particularly in his poems such as 'Krisbaner Gan' ('The Song of the Peasant') in *Sarbahara* (*The Proletariat*), and also in 'Sramiker Gan' ('The Song of the Labourer') in *Samyobadi* (*The Communist*), and very strongly in the poem called 'Chor-Dakat' ('The Thieves and the Robbers'), where the poet tried to locate not only the local but also the global site of capitalism both in contemporary times and futuristic terms. The poet explicitly said: "The merchants all over the world have been whoring around with capital, while men have been losing food, health, life, hope, language". The poet's uncompromising,

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like Nazim Hikmet and Mandelstam among others, for whom writing poetry meant risking life, as it certainly did for Nazrul. Taking Nazrul's life and *oeuvre* together, one may feel that the margin between poetry and politics in Nazrul tends to be dissolved now and then.

One can fairly easily see



turned out to be a form of class-resistance, so evident in his poetry, as he said: "Come, O workers of the land, lift your arms, your scythes, your hammers." Even in his famous poem 'The Rebel', Nazrul's declared rebellion turned out to be a class-rebellion in that he firmly spoke and stood on behalf of the oppressed class — certainly the peasants and the workers, the worst sufferers of colonialism, capitalism, feudalism and imperialism — 'I am the Great Rebel, will tire of war and be at peace./Only then, when the anguished cry of the oppressed/ Shall no longer rend the sky and air./ And the tyrant's terrible sword/ Will no longer rattle on the field of battle." It needs mentioning here that "the 'I' in this poem is no romantic counterpart of Nietzsche's God-like 'Superman' basking in the glory of self-celebration, or celebrating the insignia and potentials of the individual with Dionysian vigour. One can, of course, move on to identify certain amount of Nietzschean Dionysianism in Nazrul's 'The Rebel'; but, then, the 'I' in the poem does not remain singularly individual, but soon assumes its class-identity, merging into the stream of the masses. The 'I' itself is a class finding its voice, and exhibiting 'the will-to-express' in a society oppressively repressed and closed, almost sealed down.

But, it would not be appropriate to push Nazrul's class-consciousness to the extent of undermining the poet's characteristic concerns with man in general. In fact, it was from his deep concerns with the plight and anguish of man that his opposition and resistance to colonialism and imperialism derived their force and assumed their intensity — in fact, found their *raison d'être*. For example, when he sang of man, he spoke of man's equality, and when he looked forward, almost in the Shelleyan fashion, to a future society where all men are not only born equal, but all men also remain equal, he could not but speak of an insistent, uncompromising class-struggle against all shapes and shades of discriminations engendered by colonialism and imperialism. Thus, Nazrul's poetics and politics of opposition and resistance sprang from the poet's undivided commitment to none but man. And it is this humanism which draws Nazrul close to the anthropocentric idealism of Chandi Das and Lalon Fakir who, in fact, inspired Nazrul to dispense with artificial divisive signifiers like race, caste, religion, and even nationalism. In fact, it was Nazrul who could courageously do away with religion-based nationalism, and could say boldly that the oppressed do not have any nationality or any religion, in his poem called 'Elder Chand' ('The Crescent of the Eid'), echoing in a way Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*. Nazrul's humanism thus made him an internationalist in the way Lalon was one: he was an internationalist not because of the fact that he had multi-lingual scholarships, or a polymathic and catholic range of the understanding of global cultures; but, he was an internationalist for his infelting into, and his poetic experience of, the unity of the oppressed

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