

Rereading Nazrul's *Vidrohi*: The Politics of Its Language

by Azfar Hussain

On the occasion of the 18th death-anniversary of Kazi Nazrul Islam, who was born on May 24, 1899 and who died on August 29, 1976, *The Daily Star* takes this modest opportunity to present here an essay by an author involved in proposing alternative readings of Nazrul's *oeuvre* along the Marxist, postmodernist, postcolonial lines.

THE kind of poetic language that Kazi Nazrul Islam, one of the major Bengali poets, tries to evolve is not only a breakthrough in the literary history, but is also a political act intended to enhance a cultural struggle against colonialism and imperialism. The fact that one's language itself can be an effective political weapon is well-exemplified in the poetic oeuvre of Nazrul Islam, particularly in his famous poem called *Vidrohi* (the Rebel), which has earned Nazrul, almost permanently, the epithet *rebel*. This is a poem which is perhaps more read than any of Nazrul's works; and readings, hitherto generated and disseminated, have mostly been a recurring cycle of stock-responses that tend to freeze the semantic and associative possibilities of the poem in the sense that Nazrul is only customarily read as a poet rising to revolt against all forms of oppression and discrimination. True, Nazrul, both at the poetic and political levels, fought uncompromisingly against colonial and feudal oppressions, but this particular aspect of the poet is often pushed to the extent of making it a settled norm in Nazrul's criticisms, while circumscribing or undermining the poet's language-struggle which essentially involves the politics of the language — or the politics of the text, as Edward Said calls it.

Now, what is the politics of the text that Nazrul's *Vidrohi* tends to exhibit? Taking cues and clues from Marx's *relations of production* that surface in the historical dynamics, one can also viably speak of the *relations of language* that operate in the creation of texts. These language-relations may encompass a given text's relations to its tradition, and its position in the literary history — in other words, a text's response to, and relationship with, other texts. *Vidrohi*, known as a revolutionary poem, exhibits its own language-relations in terms of the varying degrees of linguistic audacity and transgression that the poem brings to the fore, challenging and unsettling a host of poetic norms.

It needs mentioning here that Nazrul was writing at a time when India was under the colonial rule of the British, and when an anti-colonial struggle had already been launched, not only at the political level through the conscious, political participation of the growing middle class, but also in literature through the works of Rabindranath Tagore who had been involved in an unprecedentedly massive language-struggle in that his poetry expands the strength and potentials of the Bengali language developed earlier in the hands of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar and Michael Madhusudan Dutta. This involvement is not merely aesthetic, not only linguistic and literary, but also political; for, the new language, with its promise and gradually expanding territories, directly challenges the ruling cultural ideology of

colonialism which, no doubt, always tends to weaken and undermine all possible strengths of the other, of the colonized. Indeed, it is this anti-colonial linguistic struggle, part of the middle-class cultural struggle, which Nazrul Islam carries forward through evolving a new language in his poetic oeuvre, particularly in the poem *Vidrohi*, which had appeared on the literary scene like an atom bomb as it were. And here is where one begins to read the politics of Nazrul's language.

True, Nazrul writes directly against the foreign rulers, and he was also involved in political activism directed against these colonial rulers whose wrath he had incurred in a way unknown to anyone writing before and after him: he had to go to the jail for writing poetry! While poetry, thus, took him to the jail, the language of his poetry breaks it and frees him from the jail. His resistance to the 'prison-house of language' is tellingly intense in *Vidrohi* which links him up with the glorious Bengali tradition in his brilliant book on Nazrul, says: 'Nazrul Islam called himself a 'rebel', and declared that he would not cease to fight till all oppressions in the world had been put to an end. He made friends with the terrorists, young men and women who believed in armed struggle. He sang opening songs at political gatherings, addressed large conferences... His was a spirit of rebellion. He meets the Hegelian specifications of a hero, of one who was more than an artist or a politician and was endowed with an "insight into what is timely as well as the courage to act decisively on the basis of his convictions". Indeed, this politi-

cal active and charged Hegelian self, who constantly takes the temperature of the age, is only reconstituted textually and linguistically in the poem *Vidrohi*. Moreover, the consciousness of the fact that Nazrul comes from the class of the rural proletariat and that he also believes in the politics of the proletariat goes into the politicization of his language in *Vidrohi*: 'I am the pain and sorrow of all homeless sufferers, / I am the anguish of the insatiable heart...'

Noticeable as it is, the poem begins with sharp, bold, charged, uninhibited imperatives: 'Say, Valiant, / Say: High is my head,' and these imperatives, declared in vehemence, run throughout the poem, giving one the impression that the verbal forces hitherto suppressed have found their ventilation in a way that would outstrip the magnitude of suppressions themselves; the poet also says in the poem: 'Suddenly I have come to know myself, / All the false barriers have crumbled today'. Franz Fanon, in his *Wretched of the Earth*, speaks of the colonial violence of suppression perpetrated on the colonized, advocating the need for jazzing up a true counternarrative of liberation. Nazrul, in this poem, comes up with a counter-rhetoric, if not a counter-narrative, of liberation as a mark of resistance to the colonial violence of suppression which finds further expressions in the spatial and celestial images he uses, generating both vertical and horizontal movements, and thus, putting the so-called geographical hegemony of the colonizer under erasure: 'Piercing the earth and the

heavens; / Pushing through Almighty's sacred seat / Have I risen.'

While coming up with his anti-colonial rhetoric of resistance, accompanied by the barrier-breaking spatial and celestial images of movements, Nazrul also exhibits his anti-imperialist resistance through deconstructing the colonial and imperial topography and geography; the poet himself says that he rips apart the wide sky of the universe, and leaves behind the moon, the sun, the planets and the stars. Edward Said, in his *Culture and Imperialism*, justly says: 'If there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical element. Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally, brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by loss of the locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for, and somehow restored. Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination.' And indeed, it is first through the imagination (and, therefore, through his language and texts) that Nazrul not only tries to recover his own land, but also appropriates possible celestial spaces, thereby suggesting the untrammeled, irresistible intensity of his anti-imperial and anti-colonial resistance.

In fact, his resistance takes on the shape of a fury which brings to the fore a kind of poetics and politics of deconstruction as it were: 'I am the fury of the wild fire, I burn to ashes this universe', or 'I am the fury of typhoon, / I am the tumultuous roar of the ocean'. Noticeable as it is, throughout the whole poem, the images of destruction, dissolution, disintegration — suggesting a kind of a deconstructive play of images and signifiers — recur; one notices the images of *Nataraj* and *Israfeel* in the poem. This deconstructive pose of the poet certainly serves as a threat to the colonial politics of consolidation and expansion, and also initiates a post-colonial moment in the poem; but, then, this is not at all any nihilistic deconstruction — or, for that matter, any deconstruction of the Derridean brand as such.

Here, Nazrul's deconstruction is certainly operative on the basis of the dialectic of breaking and making, as the poet himself makes it explicit: 'I am creation, I am destruction, / I am habitation, I am the graveyard, / I am the end.'

While looking into the almost-Shelleyan dialectic of destruction and creation that is at play in the poem *Vidrohi*, one begins to see the accompanying language-relations as



inflections of the two contrary states of the reality like life and death, light and darkness, creation and destruction, movement and stillness, love and hatred, and also fusing such contraries into a unity. Nazrul forges a politics of language capable of counteracting the forces of disintegration, discrimination and *divide et impera* — including class-discrimination, gender-discrimination and even communalism — that are ideologically activated and encouraged by colonialism and imperialism. It needs mentioning here that both colonialism and imperialism certainly aim at spatial and geographical integrity and expansion as long as they serve the interests of the colonizer. But, at the same time, the colonizer tries to divide and disintegrate the colonized culturally, linguistically, communally, so as to preclude the possibilities of any revolutionary unity of the colonized. Nazrul, keenly aware of this colonial dynamics, sharpens and politicizes his language to the extent that he can break 'the false barriers' — mostly created by the colonial politics, and thus, he can come up with an anti-colonial language of unity.

In his attempts to break the barriers between, and forge the unity of, the colonized, Nazrul's language becomes an accommodative of both the Hindu and Muslim myths which, held together, shape an aesthetic and political force hitherto unknown in Bengali poetry. His unmistakable flair for *mythopoeia* is indeed nothing but an anti-colonial political strategem deployed to assert his own cultural identity against the imperialist project of effacement.

It is also worthwhile to notice that Nazrul's language evinces a continuous interplay between the prosaic and the poetic, between the indigenous and the foreign. One cannot miss the creative mix of varied lexical resources including the Arabic and Persian and Urdu words, local idioms chosen from the familiar rural ambience, and Sanskritized words accompanied by an insistent conversational tone, tune and text, and also by playful allusions. Moreover, there is also an interplay between, and a chemistry, of various metrical, syntactic and rhythmic patterns in *Vidrohi*, though, at the same time, one finds a certain amount of syntactic and metrical repetitions which, in fact, go on to constitute a specifically occupied space of assertions for the colonized. With repetitions and varieties, this kind of language used by Nazrul in his poem *Vidrohi* does not prove to be only powerful, but also living and appealing, and such a language becomes an effective political weapon for a Hegelian hero like Nazrul Islam who is more than a politician as well as more than a poet.

Noticeable as it is, the space of possibilities within the language of *Vidrohi* is competently extended through accommodating a host of apparent semantic incompatibilities in terms of a series of binary oppositions which, however, are resolved into an aesthetically and politically satisfying unity. For example, as indicated earlier, the rebel in the poem is 'whimsical and playful'; he dallies freely with death; while, at the same time, the rebel is a lover, modest and shy, coy like a village girl. The poet says explicitly: 'In one hand of mine is the tender flute / while in the other I hold the war-bugle', or 'Sometimes I am quiet and serene, / I am in a frenzy at other times', and thus, accommodating the accents and



National Consciousness in Nazrul's Poetry and Song

by Mohammad Mahfuzullah

THE difference between national literature and the literature infused with national consciousness. If not judged from the perspective of the role played by literature in arousing mass-consciousness as well as the all-embracing social awakening this difference may mysteriously escape our eyes. Against this background, the urgency of defining in clear terms the characteristics as well as the form and content of both national literature and the literature of national consciousness is a must.

At the very outset it should be clearly stated that any piece of literary work written in national language and attaining artistic excellence is worth considering to be a proud addition to the national literary treasures. The simple reason is that it widens the realm of national literature. These types of literary creations may or may not contain national spirit or glowing fire within, but this lacking, if any, does never minimise their artistic excellence. Literary pieces may be of high order and of artistic excellence containing in it any kind of passion, emotion, exuberance and experience of inner self. There is no hard and fast rule that literary creations ought to be nationalistic in character and mass-inspiring in nature. The active agents working in the minds of creative geniuses are divergent and varies in nature. Literary works can be of high order even without containing within

such a way that every endeavour results in a superb creation.

Basic Difference

The inherent underlying principal and basic difference between the literature inflamed with national consciousness and the literature devoid of it, is that the former aims at depicting the hopes and aspirations as well as the relentless struggle of a particular group of people or the whole nation, and the latter, convincingly raises the hopes, aspirations and dreams of individuals.

The second one can be memorable for artistic qualities alone, but the former is to be judged from quite a different angle of vision. Literature aimed at infusing national consciousness can in no way be devoid of national hopes, aspirations and dreams. The form of such literary creations may be different and divergent, but the content should be same in nature.

If we make a close and keen study of Nazrul's poetry, we can feel and realise the real nature and characteristics of literature charged with the spirit of national consciousness. Thousands of Nazrul's poems and songs contain romantic feelings, sensuous beauty as well as eternal lusts for life and happiness. A sensitive emotional individual mind is seen captivated in these poems and songs in symbolic significance. These poems and songs rich in form and content is made in

images and high soaring flights are permanent treasures of world literature. These are considered the shining pearls of Bengali literature. But should Nazrul be satisfied with these creations only he would not have been admired as a national poet. He was not content with the poetic task of depicting his private mind alone, rather he espoused the mind of the country and that of the nation with right earnest and utmost devotion.

Nazrul appeared in the literary horizon like a blazing comet at a very critical juncture of our history. His humane soul was stirred by the pains and pangs of his shackled motherland under the British rule. This made him rebellious in spirit, and devoted to passionately portray the miseries of his countrymen in various shades, colours and tones, he made his poetry a formidable weapon in the battle against the Britishers, as well as against all forms of inequality, injustice and oppression. He was imbued with the sense of social responsibility and human urge to fight against all forces of exploitation, and finally he resolved to use his poetic genius to awaken his countrymen and free his motherland from colonial bondage.

He had also rightly realised that this subcontinent was not a country of only one religious group or a nation. From the point of religious, social, cultural and traditional inheritance the inhabitants of the

sub-continent belong to various distinct groups, of them the Hindus and Muslims, in spite of influences exerted by one on the other due to historical reasons, remained quite distinct with their separate entity. No fusion whatsoever was largely possible. Their literary inheritance is also distinct and quite discernible. That truism was felt by post Qazi Nazrul Islam. Moreover, he understood the social import of the distinctiveness of the Hindu-Muslim culture.

Nazrul launched a fierce fight against the Britishers. He had cherished the upheaval of the common masses and worked for that. He was a dreamer of the salvation of the masses irrespective of their religious beliefs and identities. He realised that to make his dream a reality the general awakening of Hindu-Muslim masses was a must. He tried to make the mind of his fellow being particularly the Muslims steady after the strain inflicted upon them by various cataclysm. With this end in view he made literary pursuits of the deepest import. He waged a vigorous war for freedom. He realised that the Britishers had already sucked the life-blood of both the Hindus and the Muslims. Therefore, to save them from utter ruination a renaissance was a must. He also knew that the march of the masses once set in motion would never cease. But how to make a moribund nation spirited and dynamic? He posed this question to his conscience. The answer that poet Nazrul per-



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Nazrul was successful in creating this mental upsurge of the masses by his sincerity of purpose with his mighty pen. He waged a vigorous war for freedom. He realised that the Britishers had already sucked the life-blood of both the Hindus and the Muslims. Therefore, to save them from utter ruination a renaissance was a must. He also knew that the march of the masses once set in motion would never cease. But how to make a moribund nation spirited and dynamic? He posed this question to his conscience. The answer that poet Nazrul per-

ceived was logical and conclusive. He felt that the Hindu and Muslim masses of the country could be pulsated with new vigour and spirit through poems and songs of quite different and distinct nature in form and content. A realist as he was, he furthermore realised that poems and songs without being based on Islamic ideals and values, Muslim history and Arabic and Persian traditions, would naturally have no deep and lasting effect on the Muslims. To awaken the Muslim masses from the slumber and to kindle afresh their conscience, he wrote thousands of poems and songs based on the ideals, values and proud history of Islam and charged with

the spirit of Muslim renaissance. Nazrul knew that the chief source from where Muslim culture draws its inspirations and nourishment was the role the Prophet of Islam (Sml) and their Caliphs which they had played in human history. This deep historical realisation made the poet of Muslim renaissance to portray their lives on the perspective of history and the present day context. Nazrul's Islamic poems and songs had created stupendous impact on the minds of the Muslim masses, and ultimately made them ignited and dynamic.

In the same way, Nazrul, an ardent student of sociological history also realised that the chief source from where Hindu culture draws its inspiration and nourishment is the Hindu mythology. The great epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are also two important sources of inspiration to Hindus. The elements of which the Hindu culture is composed of gave an extremely distinctive character to the literature of the country particularly of the medieval one. Nazrul, an honest believer of Hindu-Muslim unity and reawakening, felt the necessity of the portrayal of the Hindu heroes, gods and goddesses, just to infuse new spirit into the minds of the Hindu masses. Nazrul portrayed them in the spirit of a rebel poet believing in the power of destruction. He upheld the new spirit and sense of pride cultivated in the minds of his countermen. Often the Hindu poets spoke of Hindu nationalism alone but Nazrul sang for the regeneration of whole of

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