

essay

Nazrul: A Nature's Bohemian

by Syed Mujibul Huq

A nature's Bohemian, Nazrul appeared as a colossus amidst the socio-political forays of the then Bengal. He stunned his readers with a new voice, new vigour and message of love.

Nazrul indeed was a 'Rebel' who responded to the needs of the time beset with the tumults of non-cooperation movement in India, the aftermath of the 1st Great War and finally the Bolshevik Revolution. He was the greatest poetic energy which echoed these upheavals of the time and he was the voice of new movement. He blazed into fame with his rhapsodic poem "Bidrohe" (The "Rebel") which was successfully followed by poems of equal vigour and ebullient vitality. He created a new form, a new variety breaking away from the spell of the parent sun Rabindranath and brought the poetry closer to life. His poems assuaged the aspiration of the people fuming under the turmoil of the time. His fiery zeal was so rebellious that he had to suffer imprisonment for his poetry. At times, his outpour was fierce and loud, but he never digressed from his avowed objective of freedom from bondage. Even the prison could not extinct the flame of his rebellion and he resorted to hunger strike. He was an embittered soul bursting forth in all directions.

He served his term and vainly tried to settle down as much as possible for a man of his temperament. He turned to editing journals and composing lyrics. A fervid lyric poet, he infused a new life and new vigour into Bengali lyrics, which at that time was reckoned as a cross between Tagorian and Anglo-American poetry of Twenties and early Thirties.

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Nazrul responding to the call of time, appeared with the intensity of his passion and vigour and his voice of indignation rumbled through one end of the country to the other. His success was immediate and unparalleled and he at once became the symbol of National Revolution. This new awakening and rebellion was achieved not through traditional means but by creating a new form and a poetic innovation. Regardless of how he said it, he said what he wanted to say and he echoed the voice of the nation as Walt Whitman did in quest of an identity that the American War of Independence had ushered.

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Indeed his voice was different from what the people had hitherto heard and if it assailed any ears, it was because those ears were not attuned to Nazrul's magical innovations. He introduced into his poems a bewildering mix of Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Sanskrit words to create a form, which he thought he needed to bear his message to the people. He threw in images from Hindu mythology, Greek Legends, Judaeo-Christian references and Muslim traditions to weave a new pattern of the past glories and the present stagnation to inspire his indolent countrymen. If it was sometimes loud, it was because he wanted it to be loud enough to pierce through the deaf ears of his inert people. Nazrul defied classification because he was a class by himself and his disdain for intellectual prudery was a matter of faith for him. If art were for people's sake, then Nazrul undoubtedly was people's poet.

After an enormous flow of poetry, he turned more and more to songs. He composed an endless variety of songs to assuage his own embittered soul. It is in

songs that Nazrul has given us some of his best. In fact, some of his finest songs are his greatest poems. It is also unique that a great poet should be also be a great composer. By a natural gift, poetry and music flowed from him as effortlessly as water and murmur from the springs. With his innate gift for innovation, he created new forms, new tunes which enthralled the discerning music lovers. He adopted one of the most popular musical forms "Gazal", created by Great Persian Master Amir Khusru to Bengali lyrics adding a new dimension to Bengali songs. Equally brilliant, his creation of Shama Sangit in praise of Goddess Kali yet remains a masterpiece in the class of devotional songs. He produced an enormous number of seasonal songs, devotional songs, dance songs, even comic songs for his adoring listeners. He mingled different RAGA and RAGINI and created a new variety of songs, which were most uncommon in Bengali Music. But his profoundest creation was his love songs in which he poured his heart out. If ever his legacy as a rebel poet were lost on his people, his songs shall be fondly cherished for any length of time. His knowledge of intricate classical music was astonishing. It is claimed that Nazrul holds the world record in the number of song composed by him. A versatile song maker Nazrul has created a school of his own "Nazrul Sangit".

Nazrul had begun his literary career

with prose writing. His first book was 'Autobiography of a vagabond'. This book has Nazrul's own innovative style both in diction and literary flourish but it lacked something essential needed in prose writing. Bengal was already poor in prose literature and in hundred years there was no great prose writer until the advent of Rabindranath. Even the genius of Nazrul was unable to produce any creative prose literature. He was incapable of bringing himself into the discipline that was needed for creative prose writing. His critics have felt that he should never have ventured into prose writing.

Nazrul's rise from 'Letto' group to the pinnacle of fame and glory was meteoric and indeed phenomenal and it is difficult to find a parallel to him in the literary history of Bengal.

Nazrul was often painfully inconsistent, but so was Walt Whitman with whom Nazrul is often compared. Whitman, once asked about his inconsistencies, had quipped "Inconsistency is life". May be. But Whitman did not have to pay such a devastating price as Nazrul did with his life. While Whitman despite his inconsistencies blossomed to fulfillment, Nazrul at the peak of his grandeur and flourish veered to self-abnegation, which eventually silenced this great spirit and a mastermind, thus depriving his people and country of his talent. He blundered in his own life and eventually met with an agonising end.

No other poet in Bengal had encountered such a ruinous end except the great poet Madhusudan Dutta.

Poets are assigned to deliver a message for their people and Nazrul message emanating from his tormented heart was direct and fierce which reflected his profound love for his people, particularly the down-trodden.

It is the inherent desire of a poet to rise above the present and to infuse a new hope for the future. Nazrul's innovative form and style for delivery of his message was designed towards that pursuit and at a particular point of time he was more than successful in his mission. There was no metaphysical embellishment in his poems except perhaps in some of his mystic songs and he avowedly relegated it to the other poets of his generation. He needed a direct and pointed access to his people's heart to achieve his mission and therefore not only the words but also rhythm and sound of his voice were accordingly innovative.

Like the English Poet Blake, he had no formal education, nor had he the Books and Music around him in his youth like Rabindranath, yet his knowledge and learning acknowledgedly bear comparison with that of eminent scholars of his time. In languages, such as Arabic, Sanskrit and Persian and in classical music his skill was so profound that it confounded the Nazrul scholars. He had a penetrating

sense of history, which he used widely and effectively in his poems.

Nazrul never ascended the ethereal heights of dizzy imagination. With his feet firmly fixed on the ground of the mother earth, he imbibed the mood of the people, their language and their culture, as no poet of "Kallol Juge" (Kallol age) had ventured. These came very easily to him, as he was a part of them the common man. To understand Nazrul therefore one has to understand the commonman his misery and subjugation, his hopes and aspirations and his joys and frustrations.

In the literary history of Bengal Nazrul was the most vigorous, sublime, colourful and romantic poet. The rebel of Bengal was not a "Moha Kabi" (Great Poet) because he did not write any epic. Neither was Nazrul a universal poet in the sense that he was little known outside his own country yet he was unique, unparalleled and at times, I think that Nazrul was greater than his own creation.

Still today Nazrul is the most loved, adored and admired poet in the literary arena of Bengal. Like that of Tagore, cadences of his music rend through the horizon of Bengal and beyond to affirm that he is living. Indeed Nazrul is a living poet who pervades all the spheres of our life — social, cultural and political. He is the only poet whose voice merged with the hopes and aspirations of his people and mere the vigour, vitality and the mood of his poems would set his work apart. Nazrul exalted is the only symbol of our National Identity.

Regardless of how great he is, Nazrul is the people's poet and we have to live with him, for how long, only time can say.

Birth Centenary Lecture delivered by Syed Mujibul Huq at Kabi Nazrul Centre, London. Syed Mujibul Huq is also the translator of "Selected Poems of Kazi Nazrul Islam" published from Leicester, England.

theatre

Tradition and Contemporary Theatre

by Aatur Rahman

It is important to look back but not stride backward in remembrance of the past or in search of the root. This endeavour, we believe, puts a new life to the culture of a given community or society and opens up larger perspective for a country. Some define this search as the dynamic aspect of culture. There is no doubt that one's own cultural heritage is important because on the bed of the past, present is founded and future is planned and aspired as is said by T S Eliot, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists". But at the same time the entire notion of gazing at the past makes us to ponder whether we should treat our old traditional forms of art as merely museum pieces or accept them as basic constituent elements of modern civilisation. We must not forget that Sophocles' "King Oedipus" is still alive as a piece of thought provoking literature and at the same time performed on stage with great effectiveness because of its content and form par excellence and not as a piece of antiquity created two thousand five hundred years ago. A work of art may prove its pertinence and greatness if it can outlive the test of time, and it comes the question of its contemporaneity and applicability. We have seen in our lifetime, works of many a famous writers, poets and playwrights dying untimely deaths and even the most talked about "deep-browed" Irish playwright Bernard Shaw has not been spared. The crux of the whole concept of acceptability, to my mind, rests with the quality of the work of art, irrespective of its time of origination and geographic settings. And this fact axiomatically applies to the literary as well as performing aspects of a play. Tracking the root through traditional and ethnic art and culture has almost become a regional and global craze these days. The time has come now to think whether it is a ritualistic affair or a "fad" of the day or an effort of the outdated people to go back gear or perhaps because the new generation is bored and confused with the limitless achievements of micro-soft devices and trying to find out a refuge in the antique world of bliss. One of the stalwarts of Bengali fictions once expressed his view on "Jatra" — a popular and mass oriented traditional melodramatic performing art of Bengal — as devoid of true aesthetics and his opinion, I believe, is not entirely deficient of truth. We are not certainly desirous to practice tradition and heritage

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With this prologue, I would like to start this discourse, which, I am afraid, will lack in scholarship, for I am not one of those theatre researchers or scholars who can legitimately claim to provide a learned audience like you with useful insights into such a subject. I am a theatre practitioner involved in directing stage plays as well as acting for last twenty-five years. I have not gone through any theatre discipline, whatever I have learnt about theatre is through experienced and practice, which may be phrased as hands-on training. So, I am going to deal with the subject entirely on the basis of the knowledge that has accrued through practical experience and of course, rein-

forced once more through simple reading of books on theatre. I have also conceived some ideas about tradition, non-tradition and modernism by means of assimilation through my mingling with different walks of people of our society both home and abroad. I was born and brought up in a rural background, as most of us are, for it is also a fact that the greater mass of our country have their roots in peasantry and I am no exception. Somehow or other I, from my childhood days had developed a disliking for our traditional performing arts, especially the folk dances. I have had the opportunity of watching quite a number of narrative performances, like recital of Kabir Gaan or Lorai, 'Punthi Path', 'Ram Leela', 'Rash Leela', 'Gonai Bibi Gan', 'Alcap' and above all 'Jatra'. I was never enchanted by these art forms, may be due to my other exposure, may be I thought, these forms were not being able to retain their originality and tended to be adulterated, abused or misused with the passage of time. I found these forms, mostly narrative in nature, at times too loud, untidy, melodramatic and illogical with unnecessary over-play of emotions. Except 'Jatra' — the most popular open-air dramatic form of rural Bengal — many other forms have been lost in the oblivion and some are gradually dying. 'Jatra' is a highly emotional and over-dramatic form providing increasing credence to make-belief. From time immemorial, our village folks are charged and enchanted by this night-long performance with intermittent interludes.

I will narrate here some of my experiences that prompted a resistance within me against those so-called traditional forms. At the beginning, as I said, folk dances of our region put me against the folk forms, which, in most of the cases, turned out to be vulgar and rustic. Our folk dance forms are extremely crude compared to the folk dance, for instance of Scotland, Ireland, Finland and many other countries of the East and West. Compared to the fine, abstract and aesthetically rich six classical dance forms of the sub-continent, our folk dance in its present form cannot have a legitimate place in the world of true art. In 'Jatra', I found the delivery of dialogues by the actors and actresses highly abnormal, illogical and melodramatic. In the not far distant past and even now in many villages of rural Bengal 'Jatra' is performed without any microphone or sound system back-up, as a result of which, the performers have to shout at the top of their voice and also accentuate their performance to make it laudable to the audience. It is understandable. But I fail to understand why the Jatra performers always talk in long syllables without proper scanning and punctuation, which is often incomprehensible. Once, I was witnessing a Jatra at a Jatra festival organised by Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy in Dhaka, and as during the performance I was talking to a friend of mine sitting next to me quite ignoring the performance. I was immediately warned by an audience-spectator, apparently non-urbanised or university educated like us, to stop talking

and get out of the assemblage if we did not like the performance. That day I could realise the strength and popularity of 'Jatra' amongst the rural and semi-urban audience. In fact, question of acceptability and also popularity of an art form is sometimes clandestinely mysterious and the psyche is not easily explainable. However, 'Jatra' is gradually losing its glory due to aggression of the modern forms including the electronic media. With 'Time' Jatra has also gone through changes, perhaps to sustain the onslaught of the above mentioned modernism and media. As we know in West Bengal of India Jatra performance has become almost as modern as theatrical performances. 'Jatra' performers have adopted many modern elements of present day theatre but unfortunately at the same time given in to vulgarity and obscenity which has now ingrained in its basic structure. In my opinion, 'Jatra' in the past became popular in rural Bengal because of its strong story line and magnetic performance quality in spite of its melodramatic nature. These good qualities of 'Jatra' as a performing art form are now in the wane.

I personally am opposed to the idea when our folk-based or indigenous performances are viewed by the Westerners as exotic the way some of us from the East are inclined to think that any stage performance of the West is exotic. A few years ago famous theatre director, Ellen Stewart of La Mama Theatre Company of Off-Off Broadway of New York, expressed her utter indignation for bringing her all the way from USA

to Dhaka to show our stage production of 'The Life of Galileo' by Bertolt Brecht and 'Antigone' by Jean Anouilh. She was expecting to see perhaps a few performances with performers wearing loin-clothes or jazzy indigenous outfits, which she could happily term as genuinely exotic. But Ellen Stewart failed to realise that Brecht's 'The Life of Galileo' and Anouilh's 'Antigone' could also be exotic through assimilation of local elements and contemporary interpretations. I am quite ready to watch the performance of 'King Oedipus' with performers wearing masks that was in vogue during the time of Sophocles or Aeschylus, and Sanskrit play in its original form for the sake of historical importance and also for being acquainted with the past, but I will only relish the performance if performers' expressions are not shadowed by the cover of masks or also if there is any reflection of contemporary life. 'Mahabharata', 'Ramayana', 'Illiad' or 'Odyssey', the epics of the past are still regarded as the core books of human civilisation, because modern commendable new works like Buddhadev Basu's 'Tapashini O Tarangini', 'Kal Shandhya', Ratan Thiam's 'Chakra Baha', Shouli Mitra's 'Natha Bati Anatha Bad' are being presented to us through adaptations of episodes from these great works, wherein we see depiction of our present day life in the octet of ancient tales with ever-new interpretations. Peter Brook's 'Mahabharata' is a glaring example of such work. Jean Cocteau's 'Infernal Machine', an interpretative adaptation of Sophocles' 'King Oedipus' is recognised as one of the most meaningful works suiting the contemporary theatre world. These are only few examples.

Finally, I personally would prefer to look at even an ape not for the sake of fun only or for knowing merely my un-evaluated past, I would love to look at it to dig out a useful analogous characteristic relevant not only to me, but also to most of us.

In my own evaluation, an ancient dramatic performance can only be meaningful to the present day world when it inspires the contemporary theatre practitioners to bring forward a new work relevant to our living and dynamic society and shows not any rejection symptom like an alien element — rather possesses a proper marriage with the modern mind.

This piece is based on author's speech presented at a seminar on Sanskrit Theatre in Dhaka, last year organised by CAT.