

TRIBUTE

The prose works of Nazrul

SYED ASHRAF ALI

ONCE in a century a man is born with a genius that seems to be godlike and fortunate is the country where such a one is born, for it becomes deathless for all time. Such a man was Nazrul poet, philosopher and patriot. For twenty-three years (1919-1942) did the magic wand of the great maestro create poems and dramas, songs and novels, stories and essays. It may perhaps be too much to claim that he never wrote anything commonplace, but even the commonplace in him was touched with the light of genius. That indeed is something memorable. And memorable was his amazing versatility, his many-sidedness. It was in 1919 that the Great Rebel first burst upon the Bengali scene, but even to this day, the Bengalees admire no less than critics fail to make up their minds as to whether he was more distinguished as a poet, a musician, a lyricist or an author of fiery editorials, exquisite stories, wonderful fictions and captivating novels. His success in everything he touched was indeed so complete that it is even hard to say what his forte was. Nazrul was still a young man in his early twenties when he took the literary world of Bengal by storm with his flaming editorials and articles in the daily *Nabajug*. He had already attracted notice as a promising poet, but these valiant and bold prose works, which were something unique in the history of Bengali language and literature, marked him out as a Rebel of outstanding abilities. Rarely indeed had there been such a combination of rhetoric and eloquence, of wit and acumen, of courage and conviction, of biting sarcasm and lofty idealism. Had he not composed a single poem, the burning and inimitable prose works of Nazrul alone would have entitled him to the gratitude and admiration of his people for all time to come.

The exquisite prose works of Nazrul have a warm and engaging touch, every sentence blossoming into a flower. They are sort of poetry in prose an enchanting island of delight and repose. He spun out his letters like a silkworm and nourished them with poetic ideas of philosophical abstractions; and they are most wonderfully executed. The very touch of his magic wand transforms the transient moods and moments into something at once beautiful and permanent. His unusual and inimitable style with sounding cadences, splendid figures, elegant classicism, majestic constructions and wonderful wealth of illusion, all contribute to an overall vigour eminently suited to the time and to his purpose.

Whereas in his poems the rhythm heaves and swells like the demented waves of the sea lashed by the wind and the accents resound with the thunder of doom, the forceful and superb prose works of Nazrul remind one of water forced into a fountain, rising to a great height and making an imposing spectacle.

Ever since he started his career as a writer and journalist and launched The Nabajug, with the kind and active patronage of the great Sher-e-Bangla, his profound knowledge of religion, history, philosophy and literature was devoted to preaching the message of true patriotism and of the good life for the individual and the community, which knew no barriers of race or caste or creed or exclusive geographical loyalties. His writings swept across the country, galvanized the hearts and minds of the older as well as the younger generation and gave them hope, courage and confidence. He taught them to respect their own culture and history but did not encourage the attitude of only looking backward for inspiration. He was forward-looking all his life.

In verse as well as in prose he was always a patriot, an idealist, a man of action, a dreamer of dreams. A study of his career reads like a romance. He was a man daring and adventurous, reckless of consequences, and yet intensely practical. He loved freedom like righteousness and hated slavery like iniquity. His powerful editorials and articles in the daily *Nabajug*, which were later compiled in *Jugobany*, taught the nation not to tolerate even for a minute longer the slavery that kept the body and soul in chains. What is more, he urged the people not to make the mistake of gumming together pieces of broken glass, and then cry over the unsuccessful result, or blame the refractory material. His endeavour was to face the situation boldly, and respect facts, however ugly and ill-favoured those might be. In his opinion, those of us who cannot distinguish true gold from the glitter of spurious coins will one day "surfeit by the ear and pine the heart."

The success of *Nabajug* was phenomenal. The mighty pen of Nazrul brought not only a new personality but also a new political temper into the Bengal scene. The remarkable success of *Nabajug* can safely be compared to those of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's *Al Hilal* and Maulana Mohammed Ali Jauhar's *The Comrade*. It disturbed the Govt who sought to curb it in various ways. But no curb, no threat, no intimidation could silence the fiery flute.

In *Bandhan Hara*, the letters reminded one of Azad's *Ghubare Khatir*. Each letter was as beautiful as the colours on the wings of a butterfly, unsurpassed in exquisite delicacy of phrasing and flawless artistry. In *Byathar Daan*, the nation-alist Nazrul became international and his genius like Comrade Muzaffar Ahmed could easily claim the influence of the Russian Revolution on the young poet and his fascination for the Red Army.

But it was through the bi-weekly *Dhumketu* that Nazrul startled the entire subcontinent. Even the great Tagore invited the "Comet" to rise to the occasion, pierce the age-old darkness and wake up the Letheans. Nazrul accepted the Guru's clarion call with all the sincerity and devotion



under the sun. It was in *Dhumketu* that he wrote in 1922, "I do not understand *Shwaraj* the superbrains interpret in various ways. Not an inch of India will remain under foreign subjugation. The whole responsibility of India, the duty to safeguard her independence, the administrative control will be in Indian hands. No foreigner will ever have any say or right to interfere." It was perhaps the first full-fledged written demand for the total independence of India.

The *Rebel* went a step further and had the courage of conviction to declare in 1922 in *Rajbandir Jabanbandi*, a fiery statement submitted in the court of Mr Swinno, the Chief Presidency Magistrate, that it was not he who was on trial. It was God Himself who was on trial. "I am on trial for sedition. The Royal Crown is pitted against the Comet's flame", writes the dauntless *Bedrohi*. "The accuser is King, sceptre in hand; the accused is Truth, justice in hand. The King is supported by his salaried servants; my support is ever-aware God, who is Truth Eternal, and the King of kings and the Judge of judges. The King's voice, however, is but a bubble, but mine is a limitless ocean, for I am a poet sent by God to express unexpressed truths and to give shape to shapeless creation."

The fame of the *Dhumketu* spread far and wide and it attracted a wide readership. Even the renowned men of letters used to wait eagerly for the issues of *Dhumketu*. In his memoirs, Achinta Kumar Sen Gupta testifies: "On Saturday evenings, we would, like many others, wait at Jagubabu's market for the hawker to come with his bundle of *Dhumketu*. As soon as he reached, scramble started to reach for the paper. Perhaps we thought that the editorial pen had been dipped in blood and not in ink. What a language! They are not written to be read alone or read once."

In 1925, Nazrul brought out a new weekly entitled *Langal* (The Plough) which voiced the sentiment and views of those who were committed to the independence of India on the basis of equality of men and women in every sphere of activity and in every domain of thought. After publishing some 16 issues, the *Langal* was changed into *Gana Vanee* (The Voice of the People) to resonate the views of the newly-emerged *Bangyo Krishak O Sramik Dal* (Peasants' and Workers' Party of Bengal). The *Rebel* himself was an influential member of the Working Committee of this party.

Whether in verse or in prose, Nazrul never hesitated to call a spade a spade. He hated religious fanatics from the core of his heart. These so-called "Private Secretaries of Religion", in his opinion, "drink the alcohol of the scriptures but are never illuminated by the sublime essence of the same." In *Mandir O Masjid* and *Hindu-Mussalman*, published in his *Rudra-Mongol*, Nazrul criticises religious fanaticism vehemently and, upholding the eternal truth of all religions, underscores the need for communal harmony. All religions, says he, come from the same source; all Messengers bring the same succour for the suffering humanity. Whereas these two beautiful essays in *Rudra-Mongol* stand out as a supreme example of nationalism transcending religion, the exquisite articles entitled *Fateha Yaz Dahan* and *Muharram* testify eloquently to his profound faith in Islam.

The prose works of Nazrul have indeed left indelible marks on the era, symbolizing an age full of intense patriotism and steadfast loyalty to great ideals. The rhetorical eloquence of *Nabajug*, the philosophical depth of *Byathar Daan*, the long, rhythmic style of *Rikter Bedan*, the fire and fury of *Dhumketu*, the exquisite and yet uncanny digression in *Padma Gokhra*, the relish of the fine, personal touch in the refined prose of *Bandhan Hara*, the tender humour, free of malice, but not of satire, in *Turko Mahilar Ghomta Khola* and *Poshur Khatunati Bisheshata* all this can be traced to his deep scholarship, remarkably observant eye, limitless fund of imagination, profound and immense grasp of the language coupled with his sincere spirit.

It is really unfortunate that although the entire nation honour and hail our national poet as one of the brightest luminary in the dazzling star-studded firmament of Bengali literature, a few cynics, shrouded by utter ignorance, dare to claim that Nazrul's prose was a mere flashy brilliance, like that of a lightning or a shooting star, dazzling for the moment, but without leaving behind any permanent impression. Nothing can be farther from the truth. Our very independence gives the lie to it.

The fiery flute's uncompromising attitude towards the servitude and bondage was undoubtedly an important factor in keeping up the tempo of our struggle for independence at the right pitch. But apart from that, his contribution to the formation of the mind was solid. He was the first who held aloft the idea of complete independence before the nation when it was awfully dangerous to do so. It was he who refused to accept the non-

violent approach to emancipation from the clutches of bondage, urging the people through his fiery editorials and essays to raise their head high and shatter all the shackles of slavery. It was his powerful and indomitable pen which declared dauntlessly: "What I want is that not one square inch of Indian Territory shall remain in the possession of the foreigners." It was this clarion call which not only impressed and inspired Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and his INA but also rejuvenated the then 75 million Bangladeshis, prepared their imagination for the glorious vision of a sovereign state of their own, and the valiant freedom fighters in 1971 marched triumphantly to victory and emancipation with the songs of the Great Rebel on their lips.

The prose works of Kazi Nazrul Islam are indeed extraordinary and remarkable. Mallarme once reminded the great painter Degas: "Poetry is not written with ideas, it is written with words." Our beloved national poet wrote both poetry and prose with words words palpitating with numerous allusive meanings and shades, throbbing with genuine emotions, pulsating with hopes and aspirations, always dreaming beautiful dreams of an oppression-free Bengal, a happier Bengal, a prosperous Bengal, a sovereign and independent Bengal. The great Rebel adorned a splendid period of Bengali literature and left no literary descendant. He did not mark a stage in the development of Bangla literature; he stood alone.

ESSAY

Muslim middle class and its role

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THE middle class plays an important role in meeting the challenges of creative and dynamic living in the contemporary world. No one can underrate the role of middle class. In fact after the establishing of British rule in India formation of middle class began and colonial India had its own middle class, which went on increasing with greater development and industrialisation.

However, the middle classes, in communal India, got divided on communal lines Hindu middle class, Muslim middle class and so on. These middle classes divided along communal lines also became agents of communalisation. But it should also be recognised that a section of these middle classes also promoted modernity and modern and secular values. But for the middle class modernisation would not have been possible. Also, it was the middle class, which gave theoretical perspective to our freedom movement. Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Jinnah and others were product of middle classes.

Whereas Hindu middle class came from trading and industrial classes the Muslim middle class had its origin in feudal class. The scions of Zamindar families took to modern education after some initial hesitation and entered some modern professions like law. Some of them entered police and military services, apart from government jobs. The Indian Muslims, unlike the Hindus, never developed modern entrepreneurial class. The Muslim ruling classes right up to partition of the country in 1947 remained feudal. There was no modern industrialist worth the name among Muslims then or even now.

There were some traditional merchants of course. But they were very few. We can mention three trading communities of Gujarat i.e. Khojas, Bohras and Memons. All of them put together would not exceed two to three millions. There are some trading communities in Tamil Nadu and Kerala too. But they are even fewer in number. Thus it will be seen that by and large Muslim ruling classes lacked modern entrepreneurial class and hence for this reason also Muslims were left behind in matters of modern education and in the process of modernisation.

ESSAY

A Booker for Khushwant

AMITAVA KUMAR

THE first Booker Prize was awarded in 1969. The winner that year was P.H. Newby's *Something to Answer For*. More than a decade would pass before an India-born writer would get the prize; in 1981, Salman Rushdie bagged the Booker for the hugely successful *Midnight's Children*. Earlier, in 1971, V.S. Naipaul had received the prize for his novel, *In a Free State*. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, another writer who had a lot to do with India, won the award in 1975. In the years that followed there were nominations for works by Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry, and, on several more occasions, for Rushdie. In 1997, Arundhati Roy swept the Booker with *The God of Small Things*. By now, in the imagination of many writers and critics in India, the Booker has taken on the look of a precinct of Indian writing. This sentiment might well be justified but it raises in my mind another question.

What of the earlier years of Indian independence—would any of the novels of the new India, a novel that would have been written in the two decades after 1947, have won the Booker if the prize had been in place during that time?

For my money, the novel that would have most stood the chance of winning a Booker would have been Khushwant Singh's classic, *Train to Pakistan*. It was a very skilled debut novel. It was published in 1956 and won the Sahitya Akademi Award for best fiction. The book also won an award set up by the Grove Press and this allowed its publication in the rest of the English-speaking world to great acclaim. When he wrote the book, Singh was in his early thirties. He had till then published only a few stories. The book he produced, writing by himself and without any help from editors or readers, was a sharp and moving response to the trauma of the Partition which was still fresh in every mind around him.

During a recent, hot Delhi afternoon I made my way to the writer's door. There was a white sign outside with simple, black lettering that said "Please Do Not Ring The Bell Unless You Are Expected." I had called earlier and made an appointment. A few minutes after I had rung the bell, I heard the shuffling of feet. Like a lion with large whiskers, Singh's dishevelled face appeared from behind the door.

When we were inside, Singh said the heat as well as age were getting to him. I recognized the interior of that room from photographs I had seen earlier. The veteran writer settled in a comfortable armchair and put his foot on a small cane footstool that he had put on its side. As we talked, he would toss some pan-masala into his mouth and then throw some of it from his mouth into the empty fireplace behind him.

When I asked Singh about the book, the moment of its publication, he said that the book has "hung like an albatross as if I had written nothing else." At the time that he started writing, "there were only three writers who were known abroad. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and R.K. Narayan. I read them and was impressed with the kind of response they had in the West. And I felt

that I could write as well as they did."

Train to Pakistan was the result of this private recognition.

The book paved a career in writing and editing. Apart from long, privileged stints at the *Illustrated Weekly of India* or *Hindustan Times*, Singh also enjoyed other opportunities like a series he did for the New York Times during the Bangladesh War. There have been occasions for teaching at institutions in the U.S. as well as a role as the nation's ambassador in Washington, D.C.

There are good reasons why Singh finds that his reputation hinges so vitally on his first work. On a rereading what is very much evident is not simply the well-crafted quality of the writing, but also the striking ways in which it acts as a predecessor to so much of contemporary Indian fiction in English.

Singh says that the central idea he began working with was that "in every human being there is a trinity of the Hindu Gods—the creator, the preserver, and the destroyer, with one or the other more dominant." The peasant, the magistrate, and the communist intellectual emerged from such archetypes. As Singh narrated these details to me, I was struck by the ways in which such a way of organizing the world and also narratives have found its most distinct echo in recent writers like Vikram Chandra and Manil Suri.

But, even beyond what the writer himself has to say about the book is the ready resonance one sees between Singh's work and the writings of others like Arundhati Roy. This is evident in the sharp critiques of a shallow, self-serving leftism as well as the differing languages of the police station and the villagers. In many other, newer writers there are appeal to those varied aspects that made their distinctive appearance in Singh's novel: the lyricism of the description of the monsoon; the details of matrimonial ads; the device of Hindi film lyrics and film-plots; Urdu poetry; the first intimations of postcolonial disappointment.

Train to Pakistan does not have the architecture of plot and narration that marks *The God of Small Things*, but what is so wonderful in Singh's novel is the singularity of the train running through it. This is the novel's fabulously simple organizing principle and its most effective vehicle for narrating emotion and displacement. One almost wishes that other writers who have followed Singh had worked hard at achieving such simplicity and elegance.

There is a line in *Train to Pakistan* that retains a devastating relevance today. The line I have in mind is the one where Singh writes: "Where on earth except in India would a man's life depend on whether or not his foreskin had been removed?"

I wanted to conclude my meeting with Singh by discussing that line. When I posed the question of that line, Singh said that he felt that the book's relevance is "now more than ever." He continued: "When we got independence we were all under the illusion that the communal divide is now over once and for all. It was the British who had encouraged it. They were gone and there would be no more communal tension in the country. That proved to be wrong. We have had more

communal tension since independence...

Hindu-Muslim riots, even Hindu-Sikh riots, and Hindu-Christian violence, have gone on to an almost nauseating extent. If people have some kind of prejudice or hate in their hearts, it does come out. I noticed that Hindus and Sikhs who were anti-Muslim before Partition are the very same people who are now anti each other after Partition. And the people who had no animus against Muslims before Partition, don't have it now."

Violence, certainly when viewed in retrospect, often leads to descriptions that are simplistic or schematic. One of the triumphs of Singh's writing in the novel is the way in which *Train to Pakistan* eludes such schematism: it is as if the writer were so sharply aware of the complexity of lived lives that he doesn't get trapped in propaganda. To provide an example, even while narrating the horrors of the Partition to the visiting Iqbal, the Bhai at the gurdwara is distracted by the phenomena of Iqbal's city-life. In one breath, he mentions the massacres, in the very next, he remembers that the air-mattress that Iqbal is holding in his hands wouldn't be any good for a newly-married couple!

Today, of course, a novel like *Train to Pakistan* would have to include much about the ways in which the State in particular intrudes much more dramatically into the lives of the people even in remote villages. As Khushwant Singh also knows, particularly in the aftermath of Operation Blue Star, terror is bred in complicity with the machinery of the State in many more, complex ways. For a writer, this poses a different challenge, even when the lives that are being depicted are private ones. In contemporary writing, we get a tiny sense of this in a story like U.P. Amman Chatterjee's "The Assassination of Indira Gandhi." In other words, while I want to say that Singh's novel would have won the Booker if the prize had been around in 1956, for the novel to be successful today it would have to engage the manifold violence of the State that is not even imagined in its classic narration.

One final comment. In a variety of imaginative ways, writers as different as Vikram Seth and Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry and Manil Kapur, Bapsi Sidhwa and Mukul Kesavan, have all portrayed and protested against communalism. These writers have tried to come to terms with what is so intrinsically woven into the fabric of our nation, and the sense that we have as a people. This needs applause more from the readers and critics inside India than those outside. Let me put this more directly. The fight against fundamentalism does not need Bookers, and there too, I think, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* provides a wonderful precedent.

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BOOK REVIEW

Filling a void

DR. MUHAMMAD A. HAKIM

Electoral Corruption in Bangladesh
By Muhammad Yesia Akhter
England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001, pp. 294, £42.50 hardcover

CORRUPTION is one of the serious problems for not only the developing but also the developed countries. While extensive research has been done on the causes, nature and consequences of corruption in the developed countries that are, in real sense of the term, besieged by the magnitude of corruption.

Although electoral corruption in Bangladesh has not been entirely ignored by the social scientists Dr Akhter's *Electoral Corruption in Bangladesh* is the first book on this topic and is based on extensive research. Akhter's previous works on Bangladesh politics, administration, and corruption have enabled him to undertake this onerous task. The degree of success of the author in this exercise is substantial which many researchers may find

something to be zealous of.

For a number of reasons the study of elections and electoral behaviour has acquired a special significance in the discipline of Political Science. First, elections are so vital for the successful operation of democratic system that some social scientists have used the element of elections as a part of the definition of democracy. For example, Joseph A Schumpeter has defined democracy as an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which the individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for people's votes" (Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy, 1950, p.269).