

"I belong to the world..."

MOHAMMAD SHAFIQUOL ISLAM

Such goes the strapping spirit and confidence of a poet: a poet of the Bengalis, Bangladesh, and the world as well, a poet who was a patriot, composer and a myriad minded writer. Nazrul once said, "Even though I was born in this country (Bengal), in this society, I don't belong to just this locale, I belong to the world". He was by nature and conviction a people's poet. His work, full of vivacity, brought a new note of robustness in Bengali literature. He was crowned the 'rebel poet' in 1972 as the National Poet of Bangladesh.

Kazi Nazrul Islam is acknowledged as one of the greatest Bengali poets of all time. He pioneered new styles and expressed radical ideas and emotions in a large collection of works. Scholars credit him for spearheading a cultural renaissance in the Muslim community of Bengal, 'liberating' poetry and literature in Bengali from its medieval mould. He is a personality full of love, romance and humanism. He is a symbol of ever fresh youth, valour, creativity, freedom and indomitable human spirit, and, most importantly, a wonderful, warm-hearted, loving human being.

Winston E. Langley, the first Western scholar to study the great eastern poet Kazi Narul Islam from a global perspective, wrote an important book, *Kazi Nazrul Islam: The Voice of Poetry and the Struggle for Human Wholeness*, in which he has placed Nazrul among the greatest minds of the world. Langley's interest in Nazrul grew when he had the opportunity, for the first time, to listen to a few Nazrul songs. Langley notes: "the theme of human unity as opposed to the 'clash of civilizations' is therefore one of his preoccupations. True human unity is not some artificial accretion to human evolution; it is, rather, the organic and natural flowering of a common rooting; it is the sought-after (often unconsciously) spiritual, political, and social culmination of an ever present human yearning".

Music was food for Nazrul's soul. In an address entitled "Songeeet" (Music), delivered as the presidential speech in at the music conference on 20 December 1929, arranged by the Arts Department of Bengal Presidency Students' Association, Nazrul said, "I consider myself fortunate for getting the opportunity to quench my thirst for music. I'll request my friends-students that they try to increase interest in music and encourage the performers. ...don't discourage those who amongst you practise music. The accompaniment of music during heavy wars makes sorrows pleasant and welcoming." (Hossain and Das in *Kazi Nazrul Islam, Speeches* tr., 24-25). Nazrul composed about three thousand songs. Karunamaya Goswami reveals in his *Aspects of Nazrul Songs*, "He was a poet of the highest order, was a lyricist and composer of outstanding genius. His several thousand songs were on varied themes, forms and mood."

Nazrul made his mark as a revolutionary poet through poems such as 'Bidrohi' (Rebel) and 'Bhangar Gan' (The Song of Destruction). His writings explored themes such as love, freedom and revolution; he opposed all forms of prejudice, particularly fundamentalism and gender discrimination. Priti Kumar Mitra says in his seminal work, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*: "A historic dissenter, he attacked a number of orthodoxies of the time with his fiery verses and convention-shattering practices." Mitra reveals the nature, purpose and consequences of Nazrul's historic disobedience.

The rebel in Albert Camus' (1913-60) description is an individual who refuses to obey an oppressive authority, suddenly turning to face the oppressor in defence of his own rights. For Camus, rebellion of the representative individual

is a necessary condition of mankind's existence as a whole: "I rebel therefore we exist". (Mitra 7-8). Nazrul was a great rebel in the estimation of Camus.

Nazrul catapulted to fame with the publication of 'Bidrohi' in 1922, which remains his most famous work. At the time of publication, no other poem since Tagore's 'Shonar Tori' had met with such spontaneous acclaim and criticism for its radical approach. Set in heroic metre, the verse invokes images from Hindu, Muslim and Greek mythology. The poem made profound impression on the public mind. Nazrul stormed into Tagore's residence, jokingly declaring, "Gurudev, I have come to finish you off". The rebellious language and theme found resonance with the public consciousness of the time. He explores a synthesis of different forces in a rebel, destroyer and preserver, expressing rage as well as beauty and sensitivity.

A political poem published in *Dhumketu* in



September 1922 led to a police raid on the magazine's office. Arrested, Nazrul began fasting to protest mistreatment by the British jail superintendent. He broke his fast more than a month later and was eventually released from prison in December 1923. He composed a large number of poems and songs during his imprisonment and many of his works were banned in the 1920s by the British authorities. Nazrul won the admiration of India's literary classes by his description of the rebel whose impact is fierce and ruthless even its spirit is deep.

'The Rebel' is a furious manifesto of the self-conscious against immorality. Sajid Kamal describes the poem thus: "A universal proclamation, an affirmation, an inspiration, an invocation, of 'The Rebel' within the hearts of each 'I' of the common humanity which lay oppressed, subjugated, exploited, resigned and powerless". It is said that Nazrul would have been Nazrul even if he hadn't written anything else but 'The Bidrohi'.

Nazrul's rebellious expression extended to Islam. He believed that medieval Islamic practices and religious conservatism were hurting good Muslims and keeping them backward, intensifying social and sectarian challenges. Nevertheless, he became active in encouraging people to agitate against British rule.

Nazrul assailed fanaticism in religion, denouncing it as evil and inherently irreligious. He devoted many works to expound upon the

principle of human equality, exploring the Qur'an and the life of Prophet Muhammad. Nazrul has been compared to William Butler Yeats for being the first Muslim poet to create imagery and symbolism of Muslim historical figures. His vigorous assault on extremism and on mistreatment of women provoked condemnation from a section of Muslims, many of whom denounced him as a 'kaffir' (heretic). While his career was active, Nazrul received intense criticism from religious Muslims for his assimilation of Hindu philosophy and culture with Islam in his works and for openly denouncing many Islamic teachings. Although a Muslim, he gave his sons both Hindu and Muslim names: Krishna Mohammad, Arindam Khaled (Bulbul), Kazi Sabhyasachi and Kazi Aniruddha. His rebellious nature also earned him the epithet 'anarchist poet', as he criticized the main political parties and ideologies of the day.

Priti Kumar Mitra points out five orthodoxies Nazrul sternly dissented against: a) the British establishment in India b) the Gandhian mainstream of national politics c) Islamic fundamentalism and intellectual authoritarianism d) Hindu social prejudice and cultural chauvinism and e) the literary orthodoxy that had developed around the name of Rabindranath Tagore.

Nazrul professed faith in absolute gender equality, a view his contemporaries considered revolutionary. In his poem 'Nari' (Women), Nazrul repudiates what he sees as the long-standing oppression of women, proclaiming their rights. He stunned society with his poem 'Barangana' (Prostitute), in which he addresses a prostitute as 'mother. The first line of the poem goes: "Who calls you a prostitute, mother?" Nazrul explored woman's emotions eloquently in many of his popular songs like *Mor Ghumoghore Elay Monohor*.

"To Nazrul", as Langley affirms, "the distressed children of the earth (not of Bangladesh, Zimbabwe, Brazil or Poland, or the Americas) want a solution to their plight, and the full realization of their democratic entitlement must be a part of that solution." The universal calling for the establishment of sensibility towards equality and brotherhood is all-encompassing in Nazrul.

It was during his visit to Comilla in 1921 that Nazrul met a young Hindu woman, Pramila Devi. The two maintained regular correspondence. Falling in love, they married on April 25, 1924. Pramila belonged to the Brahma Samaj, which criticized her marriage to a Muslim. Nazrul in turn was condemned by Muslim religious leaders and continued to face criticism for his personal life and professional works. As a result, Nazrul's works began intensely attacking social and religious dogma and intolerance. His poems also spoke in philosophical terms of romantic love, and the complete equality of men and women, and attacking the social and religious traditions of the time that ruled otherwise. Nazrul came to identify the spirit of his thoughts and works as inherently rebellious.

By the time he passed away in Dhaka on 29 August 1976 having spent 34 years in paralytic torment he had become a legend, the exemplar of a religious sensibility that was not bounded by abstract definitions, but defined itself in the acts of devotion, empathy and creativity. Around the age of 44, Nazrul began losing his voice and memory. He progressively lost his mind and lived the last thirty years of his life mostly in the dark.

We can appraise Nazrul through his song 'I will go afar eternally, yet I won't let myself efface (*Ami chira tare dure chale jabo, tobu amare dibona bhulite*).

Mohammad Shafiqul Islam teaches English literature at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet. E-mail: msjijewel@gmail.com #

One Chinese New Year in Boston Chinatown

SHAHID ALAM

The old man was crossing the intersection at a point where a single shabby road jutted into a long asphalt thoroughfare, thereby making the whole configuration appear as a giant "T". He had succeeded in crossing from one side of the interlocking street to the other when...well, reader, read on.

The year is 1991. Boston has a fair-sized Chinatown, just as many major cities of the US do. It is not as large as the one in San Francisco or New York, but it is reasonably up there or thereabouts with them. A Chinatown seems to grow around the Chinese diaspora wherever they are in sizeable numbers, and Boston has a good-sized population of Chinese-Americans. Typically, as in the many Chinatowns I have been to in different parts of the world, the moment you set foot inside one, you are hit with the smell, flavours, and general ambience of the Chinese living in their home environment in the old country, although many of them had never been to the land which their ancestors had left behind so many years ago.

But whether newly-arrived in the country, or naturalized citizens, or Americans by birth, the Chinese diaspora retains important facets of their ancient and proud culture, occasionally spicing them up with tinges of the culture of their homeland by adoption or birth. The spectacular salutation of the Chinese New Year is one of them. Some of the elaborate programmes and decorative accoutrements are thought to have either originated in the Chinese community of San Francisco, or to have been heavily influenced by Chinese diasporic inputs. Verily, they have added variety and spice to the Chinese New Year celebrations, in the process making them ever attractive to successive generations, and adding a regional flavour of the country which the diaspora has chosen to call home, while keeping intact the timeless core ingredients that make the Chinese New Year celebrations unmistakably Chinese in origin, distinctiveness, and ambience.

Of course, the festivities are not restricted to participation by just the ethnic Chinese, although, as one would expect, they constitute the bulk of the revelers. And, that is also the way it is in the Boston Chinatown chapter of New Year revelry. Boston Chinatown, as I remember it from fourteen years back, is somewhat seedy, with old buildings standing with dreary looks along comparatively narrow streets crisscrossing each other and sporting lopsidedly more pedestrians going about their business than cars weaving through them.



Somehow, the entire setup seems to convey in one a feeling of being in a Chinese town, especially with the stores and supermarkets displaying a vast array of Chinese goods (often imported from China or Taiwan) with their distinctive smells wafting around, and a cacophony of spoken Chinese filling up the rooms.

I have always been fascinated by the splendour, diversity, and ancient lineage of Chinese culture, and I made it a point of making it to the annual rite of calendar renewal and all the symbolism it entails. One constant outside my paying homage to the Chinese tradition of New Year has been my predilection for Chinese food, again, in keeping with the local twists given to the annual celebrations, the more local variations and additions to the food items, the better! In Boston, my craving was for that gastronomic Shangri-la, the bewildering, dizzying, magical, and esoteric concoctions going by the name of dim sum. Small portions of bite-sized (essentially) appetizers are carted around for the diner to select, and then to proceed to assuaging the palate. Actually, they are probably not carted around in every Chinatown, but they were in my restaurant of choice. And, not all the food can readily be classified as delectable, as tastes will vary, especially in the context of individual cultural experiences and mores. For instance, one of the items offered, chicken feet, for me, is an acquired taste that, after one bite at one, I never got to acquire.

But the number of people who would patiently line up on any given Saturday midday at my favourite restaurant to get into the spacious dining hall that seated hundreds in one go eloquently testified to the delights of the splendid array of dim sum items on offer. That Chinese New Year's day in 1991 my friend Vicky and I decided to make my ritualistic pilgrimage to Chinatown, that day at midday for the pur-

pose of taking in a dim sum lunch to heighten the pleasure of beholding the numerous activities of the day. We had gone to other dim sum lunches there, and so knew what to expect, but this was special. We were going to combine two delightful activities in one. The familiar sights, sounds, and smells hit us as soon as we disembarked from Vicky's car, parked a considerable distance away from the center of the activities that had begun, and were going to culminate in a crescendo of light and sound well into the night. But, even at midday, the sounds were impressive enough, the Chinese language amplified several times over that of the usual days, now intermingled with English from the considerable number of visitors who had already made their way in, and from the fire-crackers exploding all around, the flashes to be visible in their spectacular display after evening had set in, but the shredded and shattered bits of paper from the burst crackers were cascading down on the roads and footpaths as fluttering graffiti. By the time we entered into the thick of things, which, incidentally, was happening just a couple of blocks away from our cherished restaurant, the ground looked like having been covered by an hour's steady snow-fall.

We made our way to the blessed place, and spent the better part of two hours sampling the fares from the food-laden mobile trays that the servers were regularly wheeling in, and then stopping in front of a table for the diners to select their dishes, and once that was done, moving on to the next table. Preparations of shrimp, duck, chicken, fish, scallop, and pastry went down the old hatch until the tummy had had enough and flatly refused to take in another morsel. That was the signal for paying up and taking our leave.

When we came out on the street, the increase in the number of people and the volume of noise were clearly noticeable. We were going to walk around and take in whatever was happening around us well into the evening. Only then would we call it quits in Chinatown. We were strolling down the street, happy with ourselves and the day, when we reached the intersection that resembled a "T". We stopped, deciding on whether to turn right, or continue along the thoroughfare, when my eyes fell on the old man, visibly of East Asian (probably Chinese) ethnicity, crossing the short distance to the other side. He was slight, sprightly, looked at least seventy, was dressed in a somewhat disheveled gray suit, with a matching felt hat perched at an angle on his head, and was shuffling along on small feet wearing brown shoes. He had almost crossed over when my

eyes' peripheral vision caught sight of the boy crouched on this side of the intersection, adjacent to where Vicky and I were standing, oblivious to anyone or anything around him. He was also ethnically East Asian (probably Chinese), around twelve, thin, in jeans and flannel shirt, bare head sporting straight black hair, and was intently focused on the elderly man who was crossing.

And then I noticed the lad held an infernal rocket-shaped small firecracker in his left hand, low and parallel to the ground. And things happened in what seemed in simultaneously slow and fast motion. The malevolent one's right hand held a blazing matchstick, which he proceeded to apply to the rear end of the small rocket. And the missile whooshed towards its target. The fiend was diabolically accurate. The rocket homed in on the exact spot where the trousers bifurcated at the old man's legs. And he seemed to be involuntarily propelled forward at bewildering speed, clutching his backside, head looking up at the sky, mouth open, whether letting out a silent or piercing scream I will never know. Because the old-timer had disappeared from view at the speed of Usain Bolt down the road. And the young fiend had done an Asafa Powell, and was disappearing into a side street when I turned by attention to my right. And, then, Vicky and I burst out into uncontrollable fits of laughter, and, I noticed, so were many in our vicinity. I guess the whole episode was funny, but, to be sure, the old man who suddenly and unpleasantly found wings of Mercury did not find it amusing. But, appalling as it may sound, that incident was the culmination of a perfect day for me that Chinese New Year's day in Chinatown, Boston, USA.

Shahid Alam is Head, Media and Communication Department, Independent University Bangladesh (IUB).

Images of society

QAZI MOTAHAR HOSSAIN

Trans. FARIDA SHAIKH

The following article is a translation of a section from *Qazi Motahar Hossain's Shomaj Chitro* as it appears in *Qazi Motahar Hossain Rochonaboli, Tritio Khondo*, published by Bangla Academy (1992).

The first installment appeared last week. The second and concluding installment is now here.

Naushad is a graduate. The poor fellow does not mention this. Covering his mouth with a handkerchief, he is watching fate play her game and thinking about all that lies between the heavens and the earth. The wedding situation turned sour and the bridegroom's party was about to depart. A kind of confusion and chaos prevailed through the night. The surroundings were not congenial for the occasion, and the mullah who had come for the marriage ceremony became perturbed and tried his best to pacify the argumentative persons. He succeeded in his effort, and advised the bride's family on respecting the good name of the village. At the same time he asked the groom's family on accepting their shortcomings according to the Sharia. Everyone was keen on sorting out the confusion, especially after the long session of arguments. And just as the pandemonium had occurred suddenly, it ended in the same way. Some minor differences came up on the conditions to be contained in the *qabeennama* and the amount of *denmohor* for the bride. However these small differences were patched quickly. Towards the end of the marriage formalities, Ryaisa's mother told Pachir Ma, "You worked very hard during the marriage. Here are two sarees and five taka as your bakshish." Instantly she replied, "Sister, it's a family affair. To work for such an occasion is a joy. If this was outside the family I would willingly accept the bakshish. Here I could make no contribution, no gift to the bride, that is my bad luck. I am ill-fated. Sister, that you had the intention to give me something I am happy on that account. May God bless the newly married and bestow long life on them! May they be soul mates to each other! I pray for them."

Ryaisa's mother was totally taken aback. Only the other day Pachir Ma had fought back hard with another woman who did not return the full measure of the rice she had borrowed. She was now turning down the bakshish and the sarees. Ryaisa's mother requested her several times to accept the bakshish, but she was unable to do this.

Whether it is better to remember the past or to forget it is a dilemma, and has no solution; for during days of deep sorrow reflections of the past travel like unhindered waves. When Pachir Ma and Nasir Mia first came into this house the neighbors had passed many slanderous remarks. Pachir Ma paid no attention to what was being said. Nasir Mia's mother had all along suspected Pachir Ma. And it was for this reason she was made to work so hard, spoken to in harsh and stern manner. There were never any sweet words for her. Pachir Ma silently bore the taunts. By and by this treatment of her gave way to the friendliness of the neighbours. Nasir Mia's wife became fond of her for her neat and tidy work. Pachir Ma was so caring towards Ryaisa that the girl had developed adorable and intimate feelings towards her. Pachir Ma was unlucky and could not continue to remain in that blissful condition. In the same village lived the much influential Sadeq Bepari. Anyone in need of money would turn to him. He would not disappoint anyone in times of crisis. He had one fault: He would demand the money lent out and made no remission of interest on the amount. So, though he helped many out during their time of crisis, none would spare the chance of taking revenge on him. On the death of one of Sadeq Bepari's sons, the villagers assembled and decided that they would not attend his son's funeral, the reason being he was a man who practiced usury. They would not allow the moulti to say the funeral prayer. During the same time Pachir Ma went appealing from door to door in the village and said, "There can be no revenge on a dead person." Her good senses and request made no difference. Nasir Mia was annoyed and said sarcastically, "Your kindness is bursting out, why don't you go there? Go and live in their house, get a legal source of earning and improve your body structure." Pachir Ma was motivated to go and help with the household chores, working hard the whole day

and returning at sunset. Seeing her working regularly, Nasir Mia roared like a lion and poked her with a stick, "Get out of my house! What! Being a maid you have the guts to disobey the assembly of villagers? I asked you not to, you did not care, you went to supervise and monitor their affair. Aah! So much of kindness is buried in your heart, now just get out of my house!" Saying this he poked her harder with the stick and left. Pachir Ma neither made an affirmative nor a negative response to all that was said to her. She stood still, without any movement. Then she sat down and remained like a stone statue. Then she burst into tears, which were like gushing floods. In her stony bosom she felt the melting of the frozen ice turn into a ceaseless fast flowing.

Next morning Pachir Ma was found sitting against a wall gazing at the sky with a blank look. Her head, full of dark black hair, had disappeared. Her face wore a washed frightened look. Seeing her, some of the girls wanted to talk to her, asking her so many things. She uttered not a single word. Ryaisa's mother upon seeing her condition began to bathe her head. Silently, Pachir Ma turned her face upward, looked at the face that was comforting her, touched her feet and then took the same hand to her own forehead. Nasir Mia stood stunned, watching. Seeing him Pachir Ma gave an aching cry, "Do not chase me away, let me live... let me live." Then she clenched her teeth and fell unconscious. Even with much effort her jaws could not be released. The whole day she was senseless. Nasir Mia got a doctor and he too gave an opinion. Unknowingly, Nasir Mia took Pachir Ma inside and laid her on the bed, and sat by her head side. He could hear her words echoing, "Don't chase me away. Let me live." He was hoping that Pachir Ma would wake up and talk. About midnight Pachir Ma did open her eyes and looked towards him. At first she was surprised and looked at him kindly for a while and then said, "So you did not chase me away.... Allowed me to stay? ... Stay?" Saying this she closed her eyes. She was in high fever, and the fever ended her life. When she was dying she told Nasir Mia, "You could not let me stay... I too could not stay." Kulsum had died long before, and now it was Pachir Ma who was going away forever.