

NAZRUL THOUGHTS

Bridging home and the world

KARIM WAHEED

Compared to Rabindranath or other pioneering poets/lyricists/writers of his time, Kazi Nazrul Islam's travel credentials would not be considered that impressive. The furthest he went was Karachi, where he was posted after joining the 49 Bengal Regiment in 1917. This experience, however, provided him with an exposure to other cultures and languages, an exposure that would have a major impact on his poetic style. During his time in the army, Nazrul learnt Farsi (Persian). Son of an *imam*, Nazrul's introduction to Arabic happened at an early age. As an adolescent he joined a *letu* group and developed a skill in composing poems and songs on short notice. Through his association with the *letu* group, he also began learning about the Hindu Puranas.

Combined, these experiences helped Nazrul devise a vocabulary and subjects unheard of in Bangla literature. His poems and songs became a melting pot of Hindu

and Muslim traditions. He used Sanskrit and Arabic words as effortlessly as he did conventional and unfamiliar Bangla ones. His works are marked with Persian as well as Hindu archetypes.

Consider the song "Bulbuli Neerob Nargis Bon-e". *Bulbuli* (nightingale) mute in a garden of *nargis* or narcissus (commonly known as daffodils) is an image alien to the average Bengali. But the image becomes more profound as Nazrul delves deeper.

"Shiraz-er nowruz-e Phalgun maash-e, jeno taar priyar shomadhir paashey..." Shiraz (in Iran) is known as the city of poets, wine, nightingales and flowers. Shiraz also happens to be the birthplace of the legendary poet and mystic Hafiz whose works had a major influence on Nazrul. *Nowruz* (literally meaning "new day") is a major Iranian celebration, marking the first day of spring and the beginning of the Persian year. *Phalgun* appropriately links the imagery to the *deshi* psyche.

Again, a Farsi reference, "Saaqir sharaab-er pyalar porey", followed up with Bengali



elements, "Shakoron asrur bel phool jhorey".

Through the song "Shaon Ashilo Phirey", Nazrul introduces a North Indian folk genre, *Kajari*, to Bengali music enthusiasts. *Kajari* has its roots in Uttar Pradesh and highlights the season of monsoon. Mirzapur in eastern Uttar Pradesh is considered to be the real home of the genre. As a legend goes in Mirzapur, a woman named 'Kajali' was separated from her beloved. Monsoon arrived and solitude became unbearable; she started crying at the feet of a goddess and these wailings subsequently took the form of *Kajari*. Case in point: "Shaon ashilo phirey, shey phirey elo na/ Borosha phuraye gelo, asha tobu gelo na..."

In "Aaji Mon-e Mon-e Lagey Hori", Nazrul adapted the North Indian semi-classical genre *Hori*. The song incorporates unmistakable references to Braj culture wrapped in the identity of Bengali romantic senses. Sample: "Rang-er ujaan choley, kalo Jamunar jol-e/ Abir ranga holo mayur

mayuri/ Bon-e bon-e lagey hori..."

Nazrul's "Dwipantar-er Bandi" features a poetic depiction of the infamous "Kalapani" (literally "black water", a term for exile) or the Andaman Cellular Jail. The prison was known to house many notable activists during the anti-Raj movement. The dismal conditions and the inhuman torture (fortunately for Nazrul, he was not exiled there) are epitomised: "Shatodal jetha shatodha bhinnu, shastro panir astro ghaye/ Jantri jekhaney shantri boshaye, beenaar tantri katichey haye..."

Allusions to places where he had never been, depiction of legends he had never witnessed and incidents he might have never experienced -- examples abound. Nazrul truly utilised his poetic license, perhaps with more finesse than his contemporaries. The result: a mystical bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar, home and the world.

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NOSTALGIA

Landscapes of the Heart

NIGHAT M. GANDHI

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Abba said we were going for a short holiday to see my aunt in Kolkata and then maybe we'll also go to Karachi. If I knew we'd never return, I would've taken time over my good-byes. Taken leave of my house, my hens, my books, my bicycle. And Mariam. Mariam who used to jump over the garden wall to come play with me. There was a war, but in the tranquil shadows of the back garden, Mariam and I played all day. Schools were closed indefinitely, and anyway, we didn't know anything about wars.

From Kolkata to Bombay, and finally to Karachi, we took planes but never took them back. The journey ended in Karachi mysteriously and without an explanation of why it ended so abruptly. Why were we not going back to Dhaka and to our house in Dhanmondi? In the ensuing silences and sadnesses, in the nervous conversations around the dinner table, I saw my mother's sorrow turn inward into something solid and inscrutable. That's when her nightly wakes began. She was never to know a full night's sleep unassisted by tranquilizers after that in Karachi. We remained house guests at my uncle's flat in Karachi until a new home was found for us, a new job for my father, a new school for me and my sister. My mother smarted at the rude way the fruit and vegetable vendors of Karachi spoke to her. From a confident homemaker in Dhaka, making her weekly shopping rounds to Thatari Bazar, she became an anxious, uncertain immigrant. She spoke Urdu but it was still laced with Bangla. The shopkeepers smirked.

Are you Bihari? Or Bengali?

We were neither. And it's still hard to reconcile to such reductions of whole, complex, tortured histories of identities into something as simplistic as an either or option.

My homebound mother's language remained unchanged and embarrassingly impure. But I was exposed to new influences at school. I was encouraged to forget Bangla in the new homeland. A tutor was engaged to bring my Urdu up to the mark. Soon the tenses were perfected, the idiom mastered, and the right Urdu accent adopted. I sounded like a Pakistani girl. I could now pass as one.

But 'passing' is at best a deceptive glaze over unresolved hurts. Finding new friends wasn't easy just because I had forgotten the old tongue and adopted the new. To which friend, in which language, could I whisper my losses? Which words, Bangla or Urdu, would have sufficed for the unfathomable pain and loneliness festering in my ten year old heart? At what age does one learn to articulate the depths of migratory traumas and transitions? As a child who was never spoken to about the grief of leaving, of arriving, of relocating herself in a new cultural milieu, I grew up with buried, baffled feelings. I wrote poetry when the loneliness bubbled up, poems I shared with nobody. I was surrounded by pragmatic relatives. My cousins who had come from 'there' were successfully assimilating over 'here'. They were done with life in what we

sometimes still forgetfully referred to as East Pakistan.

Forgetting was necessary to succeed in the new Pakistan. My mother sometimes forgot this business of forgetting and let loose her grief in yearnings for the slow pace of time lost in fast Karachi, the house and furniture she had left behind, for the kind of neighbours she no longer had, for *cham-cham* and *mishti doi*, for Dhaka cheese and *jhal muri*---and so much else silenced in her heart, as it learned to get by in the desert heat of Karachitastes and recollections strung on a memory-rosary she could only recite during her nightly vigils.

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It's been many years since I moved to the States, and later, after marriage, to India. Coming back to the land of my first origins forty years later, in the fortieth year of Bangladesh's independence, is about reviving those yearnings my mother slowly stopped voicing. It's about a late reawakening, a much-needed rebirth. Ostensibly, I'm travelling through Bangladesh working on a book about Muslim women, but as I watch the soft, orange disc of the Dhaka sun from the narrow column of sky visible from my bed, where I sit under the shelter of a rose-tinted mosquito netting, I begin to articulate a haze of questions I never found answers to: Who am I? Where do I belong? Which land is my homeland? What is home? Can I claim this land as the lost landscape of my heart? How does one speak of the unnamable losses of the homelands in the heart? And ultimately, is one's real home in the world or in the heart?

I brave the Dhaka crowds and visit the university campus, the war memorials, Jagannath Hall and the Liberation War museum. After going through room after room of the museum, looking at photographs of men who designed, men who fought and won the war, pausing reverentially before glass cases holding their spectacles, their guns, their medals and other relics, I'm still hungry and thirsty. Where are the womenthe women raped by the Pakistan army who later came to be designated as war heroes? The Birangana? Why is there only half a room dedicated to them? Why is that war heroine hiding her face in her hair? Why is only shame her legacy? Why aren't the Birangana awash with glory, swelling with pride as war heroes, sharing the glory of liberation with promotions and medals? Weren't their bodies made into battlefields? Weren't they on an equal footing with the male martyrs? I now understand why the Birangana, Tuki Begum, in Shahin Akhter's disturbingly beautiful novel, *Talaash* (The Search), is treated as a tainted woman, unable to secure a piece of burial land for herself in her own village. No wonder she awaits another war of liberation.

For days I hide in the fifth floor flat I'm sharing with a very friendly group of working women and students. Hiding from my own dislocation, my own depression. I feel and don't feel at home here. I follow the chatter of my roommate but can't speak Bangla with her fluently. But one afternoon,

I gather courage and with her as my guide, I venture out into the demented Dhaka traffic to look for my Dhanmondi house. We get off the rickshaw and after much asking and walking up and down the re-numbered roads, I halt before a school building. The address matches though I can't be sure of much else.

The gatekeeper asks: *Does your child study here?*

No, but I think I used to live here, I say through my roommate.

This is a school, not a house, he says.

The gatekeeper sizes me up. My confused demeanour doesn't convince him. He is from the young and edgy generation, born long after the war of liberation was won for him. He may be oppressed by long hours and low pay, but that's another story, another unwinnable war. I sense his hostility towards me for making such an outrageous claim: *I used to live here!*

He refuses to let me in.

Is that window the window of the room I called mine when I was ten? I step back and peer at the house. Is that the window where I stood as a child, gazing down contentedly at the quiet, green field beyond the equally quiet green street? But one more look at the high, iron gate of the school building and I know it's not the same house. Nor can this be the same street. Time has destroyed in its characteristic indifference all traces of earlier belonging. Dispiritedly I click a few photos of what looks like it could be the house we lived in and walk away as fast as I can. The house where Mariam and I played is moved to its only permanent home: my heart.

But I'm still hopeful about the house of my birth in Chittagong. We lived there before my father moved us to Dhaka. As I board the train from Dhaka early one morning, I'm convinced Chittagong, the charming little hill town I was born in, couldn't have changed as much as Dhaka has. The people in Dhaka have assured me of that. The train passes through greens and browns of the countryside. When it slows down, sometimes coming to a halt in the middle of nowhere, my hungry eyes drink in the lazy afternoon light from the mossy green ponds. A mother and a child in a bright fuchsia dress sitting under a stately coconut palm; a couple of old men staring wondrously at the paused length of the impossibly long train. I read with delight the names of stations as we near the city of my birth: Sitakunda, Bhatiyari, Pahartali. I wonder what that moment of final arrival would feel like? As the sun sinks behind the watery paddy fields and the muezzin's call to prayer wafts in with the evening breeze, brooding shipping containers and dark facades of garment factories remind me I'm re-entering the city in a completely changed era. At that darkening hour, the rusty tin roofs of squatters' huts and ballooning sheets that serve as their walls roll past like an introduction to a list of disappointments.

The next morning I set out in search of 152, Sirajuddaula Road. But no house greets me at that address. Instead, a bearded man in cap and pajama surprises me by addressing me in broken Urdu.

Did you bring the claim papers? He asks, a little alarmed.

I haven't come to claim anything, I try to calm him. We were tenants. But are you sure this is 152, Sirajuddaula Road?

Smugly, he points to the painted numbers on the signboard above his shop.

I stare at the sign helplessly. But this is where our house used to be, I mutter, holding back tears.

That house too, is no more. The back lane has disappeared as has the shortcut leading from the back of the house to the college campus. 152 Sirajuddaula Road is a now a shop that sells wall paint. The reaction I have sitting in the rickshaw surprises the shop owner, my rickshawala and the passersby. I sob, unleashing old, stored grief. They watch me, bemused. What could come upon a self-possessed lady to make her cry like this?

I have no photographs to show as proof to the shop owner. Who clicked pictures of their houses in those days? Could a picture show him my quiet joy sitting next to my dadiamma's stove in the aangan? Could he smell the guava tree? Smell the jasmine next to the green door with the rusted chain? See the sparks fly from the stove, inhale the guava pulp's simmering fragrance, watch the fire crackle as dadiamma blew on it through her phunkni? Can't he see me holding my mother's hand and walking up the alley, cutting across the Chittagong college campus, and trotting down the road, up the hill to my school?

As my rickshaw cycles into the growing bustle of mid-afternoon Chittagong, another house is dispatched to the permanent exhibits in the museum of the heart. The house and my sobbing settle down for the moment into the spiritual landscape of the heart. It's all about impermanence. The I who used to live in that house is not the I who's writing this essay. Who is this I, this self, this insignificant speck, this zarra-e-benishan, to borrow Faiz's metaphor, who laments her losses? I gather the shattering truth about my Self and my place in an eternally impermanent, eternally changing universe and slowly sow them in soul-soil.

That afternoon, I make a stop at Bayzid Bostami's dargah and sit on the steps of the pond watching the sluggish, people-weary turtles turn away their heads from the forceful offerings of bread and bananas devotees bring for them. This dargah is the supposed burial site of a Persian saint who probably never came here except in popular imagination. Where's my home? As if mysteriously, the saint answers in the form of another question, he who according to another competing legend, travelled thousands of miles to reach this resting place: does a faqir have a home? Isn't faqiri about giving up fixedness of homes, tearing out one's identity from narrow prisons of nations and nationalisms? Which side of the lines drawn in blood do I want to consider my homeland? You've lost rootedness so you could become a citizen of the cosmos, the saint's spirit counsels me. You have no home so you can claim the entire subcontinent and even the world as your home, a world chopped up into nations. They are all your homelands.

Later that week, sitting around a sumptuous feast of curried prawns and fried ilish, rice, daal, baigun bhaja and pumpkin flower fritters and *mishti doi* in the small, serene town of Tangail, I beam peacefully at the soft light falling on the dining room floor as my new roommate and friend settles the matter of my identity: 'Nighat was born in Bangladesh, she grew up in Pakistan, and now she lives in India. But she can call herself a Bangladeshi if she likes!'

'If she's a Bangladeshi, I'm a Pakistani since I was born in East Pakistan!' her uncle chuckles at her preposterous suggestion.

2011 is the fortieth year of Bangladesh's liberation and it's the hundredth year of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's birth, the rebel poet of Pakistan who spent many years in jail, and many more exiled from his homeland for his anti-establishment views. These words are from his poem, *Dhaka se wapsi par* (Upon my return from Dhaka) which he wrote after his visit to newly independent Bangladesh, and I offer Faiz's poetry for unarticulated longings, for the love of homes and homelands, for all that still remains unsaid, for those of us who stubbornly carry their homes and homelands in their hearts where thankfully, they aren't ever lost or won:

ham ke thehre ajnabi itni mullaqaaton ke baad phir banein ge aashna kitni madaaraaton ke baad kab nazam mein aaye gi be-daagh sabze ki bahaar khoon ke dhabe dhulein ge kitni barsaaton ke baad The bahut bedard lamhen Khatm-e-dard-e-ishq ke Theen bahut bemahar subahen meharabaan raaton ke baad

Un se jo kahane gaye the Faiz jaan sadaqaa kiye Anakahi hi rah gayee vo bat sab baaton ke baad

After all those encounters, that easy intimacy, we remain strangers After how many more meetings will we become close again? When will we again see a spring of unstained green? How many monsoons will it take for the blood to be washed from the branches?

So relentless was the end of love, so heartless After the nights of tenderness, the dawns were pitiless, so pitiless. Faiz, what you'd gone to say, ready to offer everything, even your life those healing words remained unspoken after all else had been said.

(Adapted from a translation by Agha Shahid Ali, 'The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz').

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