

ESSAY

Why read Nazrul?

AYESHA KABIR

ENGLISH schoolchildren are prone to ask, with a groan of exaggerated pain, "Why read Shakespeare?" Of course, once one actually reads William Shakespeare and is immersed in the depth of his works, and then falls in love with his plays and poetry, then the question becomes more of a rhetorical one. But it is still a question with which teachers struggle. The standard answer is, "Shakespeare is good for you!" as if the bard is a nasty-tasting tonic the children have to swallow whether they like it or not. The more persevering teacher will try to convince their students Shakespeare is not a bitter pill of literary waddle to swallow and get over with, but a nectar to sip, savour and absorb in the bloodstream. I am not sure whether that argument will make Shakespeare homework any more welcome, but immersion in the works of the bard gradually makes him an indispensable part of anyone's life -- anyone with a minimum of literary interest. The fact that he is one of the most quoted persons down till today indicates there must be a good reason to read him!

But today I am not writing about William Shakespeare. In fact, I am not writing about any English writer. I am writing about a most versatile poet, a poet of a myriad of hues, a man of passion, poetry, music and a free spirit of Bohemia. I am writing about Kazi Nazrul Islam.

Why read Nazrul? Yes, that is a valid question, particularly if one is not familiar with the man and his works. This is a question of which the answers are many... his language, his music, his visions, his thoughts, his passion, his words, his spirit, his psyche... there hardly is an end to the reasons which can be offered by a lover of Nazrul. However, how do we explain this to someone to whom Nazrul is relatively a stranger? What relevance can he have to someone not versed in Bengali literature?

This question, leads to yet another vital one -- why translate Nazrul? Since he has written in Bengali and is the national poet of Bangladesh, is loved and venerated by speakers and readers of Bengali, the depth and greatness of his work remains, to a greater part, lost to those not familiar with the Bengali language, that is, Bangla.

Nazrul has not been translated, unfortunately, as expansively as deserved and not as comprehensively as he should have been. But

before we venture into those waters, let's go back to the first question -- why read Nazrul? After all, only if he is worth reading, will he be worth translating.

Let's compare reading Nazrul to music. There is music that is easy on the ears. Surf the TV channels and there is always some loud bubbly music with rhythm that has your feet tapping and has you singing along. You like the music the very first time you hear it, popular songs of Hindi films, local bands, and such. After you've heard it hundreds of times, repeated again and again on TV, the radio and wherever you go, it can drive you crazy.

Then, if you are a layman like myself, there also is music that may not immediately grab your attention the first time you hear it. It is pleasing to the senses, but you don't find yourself humming along. It may be of a more elevated classical nature. It may be a symphony of Mozart or may be Pundit Jasraj rendering a raga. However, if you give it a chance, if you listen to it, its appeal grows on you. In complex classical music you discover something new each time you hear it. It is wonderful, an experience that enriches you every time you listen to it. It is something that stays with you the rest of your life, long after those toe-tapping cacophonous pop numbers have faded in appeal. That is how one may think of Nazrul.

And yet Nazrul has an advantage. His poetry may be elevated in thought, but like his songs, the appeal is immediate. He does not come in a pedantic package of pedagogy. So his works do beckon you and the more you read, the more worlds are opened in your soul. He can take you to the heights of the Himalayas, he can have you frolicking around Brindavan with Radha and Krishna, he can guide you to the mosque at the sweet call of azaan, have you up in arms against the domination of tyrants, or simply immerse you in the search for the meaning of life. That is Nazrul. He can't be tied down. He is at one playful and pensive, gentle and rough, the lover and the fighter, he is the ultimate paradox. It is this paradoxical nature of his that makes him so appealing. After all, none of us are black or white; we traverse in the gray areas of life. Nazrul goes beyond that. He is a prism, reflecting life in all its subtle (and not-so subtle) shades.

Let's start at the very beginning
Having said all of the above, why will a child want to read Nazrul? It is



almost a universal truth that children take an instinctive dislike to whatever they are forced to read, particularly if it is in school and from a textbook. There must be something inherently wrong in the education system in general, but that is a topic for an entirely different article altogether. But actually parents, teachers and guardians from an early age can inculcate a love for poetry and literature in the children. The best way is by example. A child hearing her mother read about the naughty *lichu chor* (litchi thief) or the sprightly *kathbiral* (squirrel), will automatically enjoy the fun of poetry, of Nazrul. Standing and reciting the memorised poem, swaying back and forth mechanically, does not bring the same joy. Alas, that is too often how we force Nazrul (and Tagore and all the rest) down their young throats! They need to learn to love the written word from an early age; that is an investment that will have returns all through their life. Like Wordsworth's daffodils, a good story, a poem or a nursery rhyme, can bring a flash on joy to one even in the darkest day.

Inspiration
While our nation struggles hard to emerge from the throes of the "developing-world syndrome", while our society is confused by the silent corrosion of values, while injustice can overwhelm a person at times, there is dire need for inspiration. We often hear people say, "We need at Mahathir", or "We need a Lee Kuan Yew", but naturally such wishes are all too often Utopian. I don't mean we should give up hope, but while waiting for the perfect leader to appear out of thin air, let's just flip the pages of our

books for inspiration. While others played safe and sycophantic, who stood up to the British and roared out, "Bolo Bir, Bolo Unnoto Momo Shir"?
Proclaim, Hero
Proclaim, I raise my head high!
Before me bow down Himalayan peaks!
I am ever indomitable, arrogant, and cruel
I am the Dance King of the Day of Doom
I am the cyclone, the destruction!
I am the tempest, I am the cyclone
I destroy everything I find in my path.
I am the dance-loving rhythm...

[Translation: Sajed Kamal, *The Rebel, Poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam*, edited by Mohammed Nurul Huda, published 1997, Nazrul Institute]

The poem continues climbing in a frenzied burst of rebellion, reaching a crescendo of defiance and rebellion. So many more poems of Nazrul have similar inspirational exuberance that can lift the youth out of their ennui and indifference and motivate them to action.

Blurring the lines of communalism

Nazrul was criticised by fundamentalists of both the Hindu faith and those of Islam. The former did not appreciate this young Muslim man marrying a Hindu girl, while at the same time creating an entirely new genre of Islamic song. The former could not conceive how a Muslim poet could create poetry of the Hindu deities. But the fact of the matter was that Nazrul had taken up his pen and used it as an eraser to rub out the harsh lines that separated the Hindus and

Muslims at the time.
On one hand he wrote *shyama sangeet*, Hindu devotional songs, and on the other hand he wrote *hamd* and *naat*, Islamic hymns. And he could be critical of religion and religious hypocrisy too. In *Anandamoyee Agomane* [The Coming of Anandamoyee], he admonishes both the Hindu deities for their negligence towards the plight of man and he also castigates the Muslim holy men for their subservience to evil:
How much longer will you hide, woman, behind the statue of clay!
The cruel oppressing tyrants, over Heaven now hold sway.

.....
Brahma, released from the demons, is now making merry
Sprinkling water from his urn, on the river so silvery.
Surendra now gives advice to the wicked demon king,
His pride and his honour, for five thousand he's selling.

.....
They shake their beards, recite fatwa, go to the mosque to pray,
But forget that they are simply slaves, imprisoned all the way.
These slaves with curses round their neck, see evil as their deity,
With sinful lips they read Quran, their beards a show of piety.

So Nazrul both upholds the purity of Faith, but decries religious hypocrisy in no uncertain terms.
There are so many other ways in which Nazrul moulds our soul. His marching tempo of *Chol Chol Chol* is a soul-stirring martial anthem, his patriotic songs fill one with love for the motherland, he has humorous rhymes much on the lines of Edward Lear's nonsense verse and more.

Poetry in motion
Nazrul's poetry is music to the ears. When he writes of waterfalls, one can hear the water cascading down the side of the steep hill; when he writes of the birds, one hears them call out in melodious calls of *bou kotha kou, or kuhu kuhu...* the leaves rustle in his poems, as do the boots pound the ground.

He conjures up images before our eyes. When he describes a woman, you see her long black hair tied up in chignon, pinned with a flower. You see the tremble of her lips, of the sweep of her lashes as she looks up... In his landscapes you see the golden sands of Egypt, the lush greenery of Bengal.

The Lover
Nazrul is a sensuous lover, replete

with romance and passionate ardour:
Oh my beloved
Come to me quietly in my dreams
Just as the moon comes to the quiet night
It seems
.....
Come to my heart
Like a garland on the wedding night
When I am in deep sleep
Come and kiss my eyes quietly
Just as the bee comes stealthily
To the mallika, the chameli
[Translation: Nashid Kamal, *The Return of Laili*, published March 2010, Adorn Publications]

Who is Nazrul?
Someone should have asked Nazrul that question during his lifetime. Perhaps he would lift up his pen and write a poem on *Who is Nazrul?* We don't know what he may have written, but we can make believe and imagine how he would see himself. Perhaps he would write:

I am a poet, a singer, a lover
A rebel, a saint and a sinner;
My sins I neither hide nor cover
I fight to be a winner.
I am Nazrul, I crave for freedom
In my verses I build my kingdom
I never sleep, I see all out there
Who sees me? I do not care.
I fear no one, nothing at all
Liberate mankind, that's my call!

Of course he wouldn't write anything so trite! But who wouldn't like to try on Nazrul's shoes just once? No, our feet will never fit into his shoes, but at least we can try to follow in his footsteps. Can't we rid our selves of bias? Can't we have pristine faith in our own religion and respect that of others? Can we not fight for our rights, for humanity? Can we not learn to live, love and strive for a better world? That was what Nazrul was all about.

Surely a poet of such stature needs to be shared with the rest of the world! Scholars need to come forward to present Nazrul in translation par excellence. Shoddy poor translations can do more harm than good. We must do him justice. We owe it to him.

Back to the first question: Why should we read Nazrul? Correction! The question should be, why shouldn't we read Nazrul?

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Alice Munro and the Nobel

MOHAMMAD SHAFIQUIL ISLAM

AS October peeps in, we eagerly wait, every year, for the much coveted announcement of the name of the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature. To us, the Nobel Prize in literature, for obvious reasons, takes the top rank with regard to interest and appeal.

The Nobel Prize for Literature this year has gone to Alice Munro. She was sleeping the moment it was announced. Her daughter conveyed the news to her first. The Academy tried to reach her; as a final point, it sent her a message on her twitter account. Calling her mother from sleep, her daughter cried out loud, "Mother, you've won." The first reaction that Alice Munro came up with must surprise all: "Is it possible?" The committee said that Alice Munro was a "master of the contemporary short story." The Academy has duly appreciated the power of Munro's storytelling. Her stories have depth and "psychological realism", as many critics consider. She presents the incidents that happen around her and portrays the characters who contend with various challenges and complications in life. Women characters are more life-like in her stories. It is to the credit of the author who observes her neighbours undergoing the same challenges and sufferings in life.

Alice Munro had been on the list of nominees for quite a while. One of the possible reasons was that Herta Mueller from Germany was awarded the prize only in 2009. Alice Munro is only the 13th woman to have been awarded the prize since its inception in 1901. The Nobel in literature usually goes to novelists, poets and to dramatists.

Alice Munro, like many famous writers of the world, chooses to remain isolated and she prefers solitude; she does not like to come out among crowds much. Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), the master of all storytellers in the world, with whom Munro's name is associated for a similar or nearly similar style and technique of storytelling, shook the world with his keen insight in storytelling. Munro, like Chekhov, can weave her stories so intricately that readers as well as critics easily tend to find an analogy between them. Both of them have a magical power of storytelling that induces readers to remain awe-struck for long. Munro, *The New York Times* writes, "revolutionized the architecture of short stories." Her life is replete with varieties; she has gone through different kinds of experience in life.

Michiko Kakutani comments on Munro's stories in *The New York Times*: "Set largely in small-town and rural Canada and often focused on the

lives of girls and women, her tales have the swoop and density of big, intimate novels, mapping the crevices of characters' hearts with clear-eyed Chekhovian empathy and wisdom." She has been writing since her teens. During her time as a student at the University of Western Ontario, Canada, Munro continued writing and she published her first collection of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, in 1968. Before this, she had opened a bookstore after her name, 'Munro's Books', in 1963 that is still there.

The first book brought Munro the 'Governor General Award', the most prestigious literary prize in Canada. The award inspired her so much that since then she has not had to look back; she carried on writing more stories. In one of her interviews, Munro says that she has incorporated her own experiences in her stories. The stories of her own life are the stories that she wrote. The com-



Alice Munro

plexity of life, struggle for survival, intricate problems of living in a small town, struggle of women, complications in relationships, conflict, dilemma and so many small details of life form the subject matter of her stories. Loneliness, isolation, and other real life truths have appeared in her work too. Kakutani points out that "Munro has given us prismatic portraits of ordinary people that reveal their intelligence, toughness and capacity to dream". Munro, like many other writers, tries to discover truth, the truth that is simple and comprehensible to all. Professor Joe Andrew of Keele University points out in the introduction of the book, *Selected Stories: Anton Chekhov*, that Chekhov "throughout his life saw the true artist as a highly skilled craftsman who spoke the truth as clearly as possible. Simplicity and realism, truth and sincerity -- these are the *desiderata* for an artist." Chekhov truly chartered all these streams in

his stories, so is true about Munro.

It is, therefore, justifiable to put side by side the names of Anton Chekhov and Alice Munro since the latter as a skilled craftswoman tries to speak the truth clearly in her stories. She also rears a belief in simplicity and realism, truth and sincerity. Munro's second collection of short stories, *Lives of Girls and Women*, appeared in 1971. It is very interesting to note that Alice Munro published most of her books at an interval of every three years, the mark that ascertains the seriousness of the author. She has published 14 books, of which six have brought her different awards, 'Governor General Award' being one of them. She was also awarded the Man Booker International Prize, a literary recognition second only to the Nobel, in 2009. Alice Munro's other books include *Something I Have Been Meaning to You* (1974), *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), *The Progress of Love* (1986), *Friend of My Youth* (1990), *Open Secrets* (1994), *The Love of a Woman* (1998), *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001), *Runaway* (2004), *Too Much Happiness* (2009) and *Dear Life* (2012).

Munro's stories must captivate readers, in the view of this writer, to the point of emotional attachment. *Boys and Girls* is one such a story in which the speaker tells her tale, one that reminds an individual of his or her own childhood and teen years. It seems that the speaker is none but the author Alice Munro, who shares her own experiences of domestic life. The story features a girl in the Canadian countryside, growing up with a forced awareness of being a girl. *Train* also moves with its usual flow in the direction of emotion and "the progress of love". A sense of loss, loss of a glorious past and love permeate *Passion*, the story that takes a reader far through the translucent window of language. Her stories attach the readers to a layer of the mundane incidents of human life. Though most of her stories are set in Canada's countryside, readers in every nook and corner of the world may discover their own smiles and tears. Alice Munro's stories are well crafted and she is aptly acclaimed for her finely tuned storytelling.

Learning that she had been awarded the Nobel Prize, Alice Munro felt "terribly surprised" and she became overwhelmed with joy. One cannot but share her joy, for literature is a delight that touches all and everyone.

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VOICE FROM THE PAST

Sartre rejects the Nobel Prize

Jean-Paul Sartre explained his refusal to accept the Nobel Prize for Literature in a statement made to the Swedish Press on October 22, 1964, which appeared in Le Monde in a French translation approved by Sartre. The following translation into English was made by Richard Howard:

I deeply regret the fact that the incident has become something of a scandal: a prize was awarded, and I refused it. It happened entirely because I was not informed soon enough of what was under way. When I read in the October 15 Figaro littéraire, in the Swedish correspondent's column, that the choice of the Swedish Academy was tending toward me, but that it had not yet been determined, I supposed that by writing a letter to the Academy, which I sent off the following day, I could make matters clear and that there would be no further discussion.

I was not aware at the time that the Nobel Prize is awarded without consulting the opinion of the recipient, and I believed there was time to prevent this from happening. But I now understand that when the Swedish Academy has made a decision it cannot subsequently revoke it.

My reasons for refusing the prize concern neither the Swedish Academy nor the Nobel Prize in itself, as I explained in my letter to the Academy. In it, I alluded to two kinds of reasons: personal and objective.

The personal reasons are these: my refusal is not an impulsive gesture, I have always declined official honors. In 1945, after the war, when I was offered the Legion of Honor, I refused it, although I was sympathetic to the government. Similarly, I have never sought to enter the Collège de France, as several of my friends suggested.

This attitude is based on my conception of the writer's enterprise. A writer who adopts political, social, or literary positions must act only with the means that are his own—that is, the written word. All the honors he may receive expose his readers to a pressure I do not consider desirable. If I sign myself Jean-Paul Sartre it is not the same thing as if I sign myself Jean-Paul Sartre, Nobel Prizewinner.

The writer who accepts an honor of this kind involves as well as himself the association or institution which has honored him. My sympathies for the Venezuelan revolutionists commit only myself, while if Jean-Paul Sartre the Nobel laureate champions the Venezuelan resistance, he also commits the entire Nobel Prize as an institution.

The writer must therefore refuse to let himself be transformed into an institution, even if this occurs under the most honorable circumstances, as in the present case.

This attitude is of course entirely my own, and contains no criticism of those who have already been awarded the prize. I have a great deal of respect and admiration for several of the laureates whom I have the honor to know.

(COURTESY: THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, 17 DECEMBER 1964).

Jean-Paul Sartre