

Kazi Nazrul Islam and the October Revolution

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On 25 October 1917 in Russia – 7 November in India – the Bolsheviks led an armed insurrection against Petrograd. News of the revolution reached India and Nazrul, then enlisted in the 49th Bengal and stationed in Karachi, celebrated. He entertained his fellow soldiers by singing songs and reading to them about the liberation of the Russians from the clutches of the Czar. The success of the Bolsheviks inspired Nazrul's poetry and fiction. His poems on equality in *Samyabadi* were inspired by the ideals of the Bolshevik Revolution. He would also translate the Communist anthem.

But the earliest impact of the October Revolution was on Nazrul's fiction. In the story "Byathar Dan," Dara and Saiful Mulk travel from Baluchistan via Afghanistan to the Caucasus to join the Red Army. It was dangerous to be writing about Indian soldiers deserting and joining the Red Army, and Muzaffar Ahmed, the assistant editor of *Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Patrika* where Nazrul had sent the story, was worried about repercussions on the paper. A few years later, Muzaffar Ahmed would help found the Indian Communist Party, but, for the present, he replaced the name "Lal Fauji" (Red Army) with "Mukti Shebok Sainyader Dal" (Soldiers of Freedom). The words of Dara in the story reflect Nazrul's idea that it was a revolution such as the Bolshevik Revolution that would bring freedom to the down-trodden people of the world.

After the Bengal Regiment was disbanded, Nazrul returned to Bengal. After a brief visit to Churulia, he went to Calcutta. Initially, he stayed with Muzaffar Ahmed at the office of *Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Patrika*. From May 1920, he also became joint editor of the

newly-founded *Nabajug* with Muzaffar Ahmed. Towards the end of 1925, Nazrul started becoming more involved in active politics. He was one of the founders of the Labour Swaraj Party of the Indian National Congress and became the de facto editor of the party weekly, *Langol* (Plough). The first issue of *Langol*, published on December 24, included Nazrul's *Samyabadi* poems, perhaps the first poems written in Bangla on the Communist idea of equality. The paper also contained the manifesto of the Labour Swaraj Party of the Indian National Congress, stressing the need to organize workers and peasants to become more conscious of their political rights in order to wrest independence from the British rulers. *Langol* stopped publication in April 1926. From August that year, it was replaced by *Gono-Bani* (The People's Message).

Nazrul Islam's political interests are reflected in his three novels: *Bandhon Hara* (1927), *Mrityukshudha* (1930) and *Kuhelika* (1931). Each of Nazrul's novels has a rebel as the central character if not the protagonist. Thus in *Bandhon Hara*, which contains some autobiographical details of the writer's life as a soldier in Karachi, Nazrul portrays a rebel in Nuru. Even though Nuru is a soldier, he refuses to abide by military discipline and is often sent to the quarter guard, the military lock-up. *Mrityukshudha* depicts a Bolshevik, and the protagonist of *Kuhelika* is an armed revolutionary with socialist leanings.

Nazrul, who had got married in 1924 to Ashalata Sengupta, moved to Krishnanagar. Shortly after this move, the Nikhil Bangiya Proja Sammelan, the All-Bengal Peasants Conference, was held there. The conference opened with Nazrul's "Sramiker Gaan" (Song

of the Workers).

It was in Krishnanagar that Nazrul wrote his second novel, *Mrityukshudha*, which of all his novels reflects most strongly Nazrul's interest in Communism. The focus in *Mrityukshudha* is divided between Mejo Bou, who attempts to rise above her abject poverty by converting to Christianity, and Ansar, a



Bolshevik, to whom Mejo Bou finds herself attracted. However, it is not so much the love story as the extreme poverty of the people in Krishnanagar which strikes the reader and explains the setting in which Ansar appears – rather late in the novel. To escape the grinding poverty some, including Mejo Bou, convert to Christianity. Ansar offers another solution: Communism.

Ansar exhorts people to become aware of

their own pitiable condition and to rise against the conditions that debase them. However, apart from Mejo Bou – who is inspired to start a school for poor children – Ansar fails to get even one convert to his way of thinking. Still, he is arrested. Before he is off to jail, he requests the British police officer to allow him to say farewell to the people who had gathered – more out of curiosity than for love of the man.

Do not surrender the demand for your rights under any circumstances. Perhaps you too will have to wear shackles like me and go to jail. You might have to face bullets and die. Your own countrymen will stand in your way, will create all sorts of difficulties for you, still you must not relinquish the path you have chosen. Do not turn back. Those in front will die or give way, those at the back must take their empty places. Your freedom will come over your dead bodies. Do not grieve that you have no weapons. If you do not lack the strength of spirit that fighting soldiers have, you will be victorious.

The police officer is worried that things will get out of control, but Ansar knows that, despite all his speeches, despite all the cries of the people in the crowd, no one will follow him.

Succumbing to tuberculosis – a disease which also affected Muzaffar Ahmed, who, however, managed to survive it – Ansar is a failure. It is only the love of the woman he has loved all his life that comforts him at the end – but to whom he will have transmitted his dread disease.

The main focus in *Kuhelika* is the anti-British movement. Through Jahangir, Nazrul imagines how a Muslim might have joined the Indian nationalist movement. The Hindu

revolutionaries do not want to include Muslims in their movement. However, Promotto, their leader, explains that it is crucial to include Muslims: "The day India becomes united is the day the British will have to pack up and leave. The British know it, and so does the common person. The magic of the two words 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' provides the talisman for continuity of the British Empire in India..." At the same time, Muslims must be weaned from their dependence on Muslim powers outside India and instead feel a love for the motherland.

Though not portrayed as a Communist, Jahangir is careless about his inherited wealth. And, at the end when he is being transported for life, he asks his mother to give the wealth belonging to him to the two women in his life. One of them, Champa, the female revolutionary, will use that money to support women and children who have none to look after them.

Moving from the rebel through the Bolshevik to the revolutionary, the novels reiterate Nazrul's call to obliterate all forms of oppression and discrimination. The destruction that the poet calls for in his passionate, iconoclastic "Bidrohi" was in order to create a new world from the ashes of the old, the world that the October Revolution had promised, a world where the oppressors and the oppression they wreaked on the helpless would be obliterated. Sadly, neither in Russia nor in India did this ideal world materialize.

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Thinking about Nazrul in Cuba: Love and Revolution

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I visited Havana, Cuba, in January this year. I was invited there to give a lecture on the significance of Fidel Castro and the reception of the Cuban Revolution in Asia, Africa, and Latin America at a symposium organized by US-based Global Center for Advanced Studies in collaboration with the University of Havana. I also interacted with some Cuban poets, writers, artists, and activists. And whenever I could, I talked to the people in Havana's streets. It is they who taught me the most about Cuba, Castro, and Che. They even made me think about our own poet—and my all-time favorite poet—Kazi Nazrul Islam (1898–1976), undoubtedly one of the major figures in Bengali poetry and music.

In fact, I brought up Nazrul frequently in my conversations with the folks I met in Havana. Nazrul also figured prominently in my lecture on the Cuban Revolution. But why Nazrul in Cuba?

The first Cuban I met in Havana was Raul, a taxi driver, who told me: "Cuba is no paradise, and we still need to address many problems here. But, as socialists we're strong, and we know how to struggle and fight—fight against US imperialism." And in Nazrul's voice we continue to hear the cadences, inflections, and accents of struggle, resistance, and liberation. And it is Nazrul—organically rooted in the struggles of his own people, i.e., poor peasants and workers—who could inspire the Cuban writer David Fernández Chericán to offer such lines as "Se solicita un mundo/ Sin monopolios/ Ni policia" (Wanted: a world/ without monopolies/ without police). When I discussed Nazrul with some of my comrades in Havana, while also sharing with them a few of Nazrul's major poems, they responded by saying: "Nazrul is our poet—a Cuban poet as well."

I myself saw some immediate intersections between Nazrul and a particular constellation of Cuban poets constituted by figures like Nicolás Guillén (1902–1989), Pablo Armando Fernández (1930–), Roberto Fernández Retamar (1930–), Miguel Barnet (1940–), and Nancy Morejon (1944–). Their different styles and contexts and conjunctures notwithstanding, they all mediated and mobilized in their works the Marxian idea of the "Permanent Revolution." Nazrul goes almost literal about it in "Bidrohi," declaring at the top of his voice: "I, the great rebel, shall rest in quiet only when I find / The sky and the air free of the groans of the wretched of the earth." I thought to myself: Had Che Guevara known Nazrul's high-voltage political poem "Bidrohi"—stylistically and aesthetically innovative as it is—he would have always kept it as an explosive in his pocket, where he used to keep his favorite Neruda poems.

Then there is José Martí (1853–

1895)—Cuba's national hero, universally known as the "Apostle of Independence." He is also one of Latin America's most influential poets. Che Guevara himself drew inspiration and energy from Martí, viewing of him as the quintessential revolutionary. As José Kozser once put it, "Every Cuban in his heart of hearts wants to be José Martí." When I stood in front of the sunlit towering monument to Martí—the 59-foot-tall monument that looms over the famous 11-acre "Revolution Plaza" in Havana—I immediately thought of Nazrul and his lines: "Say, Hero / Say: My head is eternally held high." And I found it compelling to compare Nazrul to Martí in Havana. Both admired Walt Whitman. While Martí introduced Whitman and his free verse to Spanish-language poetry, Nazrul for the first time creatively appropriated in Bengali poetry the Whitmanesque spirit itself. One finds a number of parallels between



Marte, Havana

Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Nazrul's "Bidrohi." One can also trace even more thematic and stylistic parallels between Whitman and Martí. But I find Nazrul much more passionate, more combative, and even more radical than both Whitman and Martí. While I think Whitman's "I" cannot range beyond the horizon of a certain kind of democracy, and while Martí's "I" is decisively in the middle of life-and-death struggles for national independence, I think Nazrul's "I"—used more than a hundred times in "Bidrohi"—exemplarily inaugurates a collective revolutionary subjectivity—an unprecedented event in the history of Bengali poetry.

2 So, while in Havana, I realized once again that Nazrul is more than a rebel poet. He is in fact a "revolutionary." As Nazrul himself repeatedly declares at different registers in his poem

"Dhumketu" [The Comet]: "Again I've come for the great Revolution." Nazrul is also a revolutionary in the hard political sense of the term. Along with his comrade Muzaffar Ahmed, Nazrul contemplated building a real revolutionary communist party in India in 1921—the year in which he wrote his "Bidrohi." Then, in 1925, he actually ended up founding the "Labor Swaraj Party." Nazrul himself wrote and signed its manifesto that clearly bespeaks his profound predilection for revolutionary party politics in colonial India.

Further, the pages of the *Dhumketu*—the magazine Nazrul edited in 1922—amply demonstrate Nazrul's deep-seated aversion to piecemeal reform under the British Raj and his profound faith in the question of revolution. There are other examples of course. But, truly, it was Nazrul who—before Gandhi or even any of his contemporaries—issued a call-to-action for nothing short of the total independence of India from British colonial rule. But Nazrul—well before the Caribbean revolutionary Frantz Fanon—realized that national liberation is undoubtedly necessary and yet profoundly inadequate.

What, then, was more important for Nazrul was a total rupture with the existing order of things—a revolutionary transformation of society at large. In fact, Nazrul is interested in nothing short of the total emancipation of humanity. And, for Nazrul, the Revolution is love made visible—the love of the oppressed once asserted: "[...] the true revolutionary is always guided by a feeling of love." Nazrul is certainly a true revolutionary in this sense. For Nazrul, love itself is revolutionary.

The points made above are all evident enough in at least two collections of Nazrul's poems, titled *Samyabadi* [The Communist] and *Sarbohara* [The Proletariat], respectively published in the nineteen twenties. Given the revolutionary humanism of these works exemplified in these works, I think Nazrul can also be reckoned a true predecessor to such major "third-world" revolutionaries as Aimé Césaire, Amílcar Cabral, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and Fanon himself. It is this very revolutionary Nazrul that preoccupied me in Cuba. And it is this Nazrul that remains relatively unheeded in contemporary Bengali literary criticism.

To honor the legacy of Nazrul then is to rethink, among other things, his revolutionary poetry and politics at a time of monstrous inequalities, injustice and alienation, against which Nazrul had fought with such courage, conviction and commitment. And love. And struggle is love made visible.

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Understanding Nazrul and His World

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How did Nazrul perceive the world literature of his time? Was he widely read, and did he interact with the literary ideas shaping twentieth century literary modernity?

We can find answers to these questions in his essay "Contemporary World Literature" in which Nazrul outlines his literary influences. They seem to fall into three categories—the surrealists and the progenies of the Romantic tradition, the Realists, and what we can now see as the forefathers of the magic realist tradition. His outline also suggests his admiration for Fyodor Dostoevsky, Maxim Gorky and Karl Marx, men whose works appeared to him to affect the lives of the masses. We find Nazrul mentioning fondly Isamu Noguchi, Knut Hamsun, Wladyslaw Remont among others, providing us with a range of names of authors of international repute of his time that is truly amazing.

It seems to be the case that Nazrul was helping to shape literary traditions at home by drawing inspiration from diverse realms of world literature. The home terrain Nazrul wanted to shape was fomenting with dissent. An emergent national consciousness was seeking to delegitimize colonial rule in India while the national politics that had been shaping popular sentiments was becoming increasingly frictional, and was seeking to dislodge Hindu-Muslim unity in India. To impact on home politics through literature, Nazrul looked towards the world for inspiration.

One such instance of drawing inspiration from the world can be seen in the poem "Kemal Pasha" of the *Agnibina* collection. It addresses the new political consciousness in the Muslim world after the disbanding of the Ottoman Sultanate precipitated by the Great War in Europe. We now know that the demise of the Ottomans had impacted on politics in India significantly. Indeed, the reaction amongst Muslims in India was so sharp that it had prompted Gandhi to become involved in a political movement that had sought to restore the *Khilafat*. Nazrul's poems, however, view the political paradigm shift differently.

Nazrul hails the constitutional reforms of Kemal Ataturk with thus: "The brave son of a delirious mother, my brother Kemal has risen/ Alarm bells are ringing, as he is unstoppable/ Kemal! What splendid work you have done brother! Ho ho, Kemal! What splendid work you have done brother!! (my trans.) His enthusiasm for Kemalists suggests Nazrul's commitment to the kind of political change that he saw as central to society's progress, something that could be achieved only by accepting the challenges of the present. Perhaps this is what irked literary and religious orthodoxy then since its pallbearers were refusing to come to terms with Nazrul's vision of progress.

We see this vision manifesting itself in the "Contemporary World Literature" essay too.

While chalking out the influence of leading visionaries and the revolutionary artists on his own artistic development, he mentions a third kind, the likes of Leonid Andreyev and Knut Hamsun, who admired the visionary and the revolutionary alike to achieve a synthesis that Nazrul found key to enacting change in life and in the arts.

Nazrul was certainly an ardent reader as well as a versatile writer and composer. His admiration for Kemal Ataturk in "Kemal Pasha," his acknowledgment of European literary forerunners in "Contemporary World Literature," his ghazals, kirtan, bhaitali, hamdnaats as well other forms of music provide ample evidence of his multifaceted artistic interests. In addition, his editorial contributions to various literary and political supplements suggest that Nazrul was a man actively engaged in crucial conversations taking place in the world around him. That he belonged to a world that was fast changing as the old colonial order was losing its grip on India and a new order emerging is, of course, evident in poems like "Bidrohi" or "Dhumketu."

Reading Nazrul as a key figure in World Literature allows us an additional perspective through which we can view the shaping of modern Bengali literature. Because of Raabindranath's towering influence on the ways Bengalis imagine their relationship to the world in art, we often fail to see that Nazrul too was a formative figure in the shaping of the world view of Bengalis. While we can trace the world of the peasants and artisans of rural Bengal in Nazrul's works we can also view in them the people struggling in the cities of Bengal. We can find as well articulation of love and passion that reminds us of the love stories of other

cultures that have captured the world's imagination. Nazrul could inspire the revolutionaries of his time and cause alarm in colonial quarters through poems such as "Anandomayee Agamone."

However, it is best to enjoy the different strands of Nazrul's work and immerse ourselves in his sublime genius. He is important, among other reasons, because of his contribution to the growth of modernity in colonial Bengal. We must also acknowledge the vast range of Nazrul's works. We must see his renditions of kirtan, bhajan, songs and hamdnaats glorifying Islam and its contribution to human civilization, and his paens celebrating the working class and the peasantry as evidence of artistry tied to his quest to understand humanity in its diversity, in the complexity of existing as one among the many. True appreciation of Nazrul Islam and his art will only happen when we are able to see him in relation to the world in which he lived and the world he had created in his works.

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