

Kazi Nazrul Islam: Some Questions and Concerns

AZFAR HUSSAIN

[...] rub your conceptual blocs together in such a way that they catch fire! –Karl Marx

In his voice we continue to hear the cadences, inflections, and accents of resistance and even revolution. And his syntax continues to morph into what the Irish anti-colonial writer James Joyce calls “sin-talks,” disturbing and disrupting the literary Establishment—even the “existing social and political order of things.”

And it is he who could “shout himself hoarse in Calcutta football matches and spend silent hours over the chessboard,” as one of his contemporaries, Buddhadeva Bose, observes. And “he had once started a gramophone shop and even acted in a play and a film; he has been loved by every notable contemporary, and numerous unnotables; he has been a living denial of everything that withers the heart; his name has been a synonym for charm,” as Bose further tells us.

And it is he who rubs his words and images and tropes such that they catch fire. And it is he who proclaims that he is Krishna’s throat; that he drinks poison from the ocean of sufferings and pain; and that he is at once the *Om* of Ishan’s horn and the sound of Israfeel’s war-bugle. And it is he who stages an unprecedentedly dramatic juxtaposition of the banal and the sublime, the abstract and the concrete, the general and the specific, in the dialectical dance of his imagination.

And it is he who in a poem characterizes himself as the “rebel, the rebel son of the mother-earth.” I am speaking here of none other than our Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976)—known as our rebel poet, undoubtedly a major voice in the history of Bangla literature. But also, by his own admission, Nazrul is more than a rebel poet; he’s a revolutionary. He declares in his famous poem “Dhumketu” [The Comet]: “I’ve come now for the great Revolution!”

The leading French philosopher Alain Badiou maps out a global revolutionary tradition of poetry in *The Age of the Poets* (2014) thus: “In the last century, some truly great poets, in almost all languages on earth, have been communists. In an explicit or formal way, for example, the following poets were committed to communism: in Turkey, Nâzim Hikmet; in Chile, Pablo Neruda; in Spain, Rafael Alberti; in Italy, Edoardo Sanguineti; in Greece, Yannis Ritsos; in China, Ai Qing; in Palestine, Mahmoud Darwish; in Peru, César Vallejo; and in Germany, the shining example is above all Bertolt Brecht. But we could cite a very large number of other names in other languages, throughout the world.” One can surely place Nazrul in the constellation of the poets Badiou lists here. Nazrul even anticipates some crucial insights mobilized by some of those poets, as I have argued elsewhere.

Nazrul takes poetry itself as a charged site of actions and interventions, even as an anti-colonial and revolutionary praxis. His major poem “Bidrohi” [The Rebel] is but only one example, not to mention his collection of poems instructively titled *Sammyabadi* [The Communist]. Even his early stories, with which Nazrul began his writing career, at least partly attest to that praxis, although his voice as a whole can by no means be characterized quickly and one-sidedly, simply given his phenomenal productivity and the diversity of his passions, practices, and styles. Indeed, a poet and a musician in the first place, Nazrul is also a short-story writer, novelist, playwright, essayist, theorist (even a theorist of “world literature”), translator, film-maker, editor, journalist, even a drummer, and an actor. And he was a revolutionary activist in his own right. He is the only major Bengali poet to have come from the rural proletariat, one who drew energy and inspiration from the trinity of the

revolutions of his times—the Irish Revolution, the Turkish Revolution, and, above all, the Russian Revolution of 1917.

I cannot even quickly traverse the entire range—staggering as it is—of Nazrul’s *oeuvre* here; nor do I intend to rehearse well-known positions *vis-à-vis* his work. But I want to call attention to only a few significant tracks and trajectories in his work that have received little or no attention in contemporary Nazrul criticism. For instance, first, Nazrul is one of those rare poets who could effortlessly translate some of the basic tenets of even Marxian critique of political economy into the idiom of poetry without losing aesthetic integrity. One can readily mention his poems “Coolie Majoor” and “Kishaner Gaan”—among many others—as effective examples. In all this, Nazrul invites comparison with the German poet-playwright Bertolt Brecht, the Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton, and the Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos. Of course, Nazrul is no mechanical Marxist. But his deep veneration of Marx is explicitly spelled out in his largely-unread essay on “world literature.” He came to know *The Communist Manifesto* via his closest comrade Muzaffar Ahmad (1889–1973)—one of the founders of the Communist Party of



KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM
1889-1976

India—and particularly via his good friend Saumyendranath Tagore (1901–1974)—grand-nephew of Rabindranath Tagore and the founder of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India as well as the first translator of *The Communist Manifesto* itself in the subcontinent. Nazrul’s *Sammyabadi* serves as a compelling example of how he creatively internalized and mobilized some of the Manifesto’s ideas, while variously zeroing in on the question of what Marx himself calls “universal human emancipation.” Nazrul is indeed an exemplary revolutionary humanist both in the communist tradition and in the indigenous one that can be traced back to Chandidas, Nanok, and Lalon Fakir, for instance.

Second, Nazrul’s reflections on what is called “world literature” remain largely unheeded. In his superb essay titled “Bortoman Bishshya Sahittya,” Nazrul astonishingly comes to articulate—as early as the second decade of the twentieth century—his anti-Eurocentric internationalism that, I argue, can be effectively pressed into the service of decolonizing comparative literature today. Of course, there’s a distinction between internationalism and today’s trendy, free-floating cosmopolitanism. Internationalism is profoundly political; it designates a committed and even a combative

position that is acutely attentive and opposed to all forms and forces of oppression across the world. An internationalist in this sense, Nazrul comes to demystify—in his own way—the unequal exchange between the “East” and the “West” in the domain of literature as such, while valorizing the “universal” and emancipatory content of literary works themselves.

Third, Nazrul’s creative multi-lingual interventions and first-rate works of translation have hitherto received very little attention. Nazrul knew at least 6 languages: English, Arabic, Persian, Hindi, Urdu, Sanskrit. The inaugurator of the *ghazal* form in Bangla poetry and music, Nazrul even ended up writing some “ghazals” in Urdu and some “bhajans” in Hindi. Nazrul had a profound love and knowledge of Persian poetry in particular; he was deeply drawn to such Persian poets as Sheikh Sa’adi, Hafiz, Rumi, Jaami, and Omar Khayyam. We know Khayyam’s “rubayyiat” has been profusely translated into Bangla. But, in my reckoning, no attempts can match up to Nazrul’s beautiful translations of Khayyam. Equally beautiful and even powerful are Nazrul’s translations of not only Hafiz’s “ghazal”’s but also his “rubaiyyat” (for which Hafiz is of course less known than Khayyam in our part of the world). Nazrul even ventured to translate into Bangla more than 30 Quranic verses. I think we would amply benefit from undertaking a comprehensive study of Nazrul’s works of translations.

Fourth, not much attention has been paid to how Nazrul revolutionizes the field of metrical experiments by appropriating in his poetry with unusual effects at least five different Arabic and Persian meters such as *Motaaqarib*, *Motdarik*, *Hajaz*, *Rajaz*, and *Mashaqel*. His poem called “Dodool Dool”—composed in *Motaaqarib*—is a metrical *tour de force*, a poem that seems to be anticipating even some of the textures and valences of today’s hip-hop and rap. Nazrul also studied ancient Sanskrit poetry, and he uses in Bangla such Sanskrit meters as *Anushtup*, *Totok*, *Mondakranta*, and even *Shardul Brikrityo*, clinching the point that even the experimental appropriation of meters is by no means a politically and ideologically innocent practice.

Last, but by no means least: Although it’s customary to compare Nazrul to Byron and Shelley and Whitman, I think we would also do well to explore both aesthetic and ideological connections between Nazrul and certain revolutionary poets from what Che Guevara once called the “tri-continent”—Asia, Africa, and Latin America—in the very spirit of Nazrul’s own critical stance *vis-à-vis* “world literature.” One may trace exciting and useful parallels between Nazrul and a whole of host of poets from the “third world”—the Caribbean poet Aimé Césaire, the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, the Latin American poets Roque Dalton and Otto René Castillo, the Korean poet Kim Chi Ha, the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and the Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish, for instance—all of whom were fiercely opposed to such systems of oppression as capitalism, colonialism/imperialism, and racism, among others, and all of whom deeply believed in revolutionary politics. To put it bluntly: to rediscover Nazrul in our times is not to depoliticize him but to rediscover a revolutionary aesthetic and politics in the interest of the “total emancipation of humanity,” to use the African revolutionary Amílcar Cabral’s phrase.

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TEMPLES AND MOSQUES

BY KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM

TRANSLATED BY SOHANA MANZOOR



Suddenly, I saw a skeletal, wasted beggar-woman begging in the streets with a new-born child at her breast. It was wailing in a thin voice as if protesting against its birth. The woman said, “I can’t even give him milk and he has just arrived. I have no milk at my breast.” I heard the voice of the world’s mother in hers. A man at my side sneered, “And you had to have a male child at this hour too?”

The woman just looked at him without batting her eye-lashes once. Her eyes were burning like stars as if she was saying, “We have to sell our bodies because of hunger. And we sell it to people like you.” Yes, this man could very well be the father of this child. If it’s not him, it must be his friend or brother.

Three days later, I saw the same beggar-woman on the street again. She had no child

at her breast, and her eyes were vacant. The other day, when she had the child with her, I had seen the love of the universe in her eyes and her voice was earnest. But today, the mother in her was dead and she was begging for the sake of begging.

However, she recognized me. I had given her the six paisas I had for the tram fare. Her eyes suddenly welled up. I asked, “Where’s your son?” She pointed to the sky and said, “Will you come with me, Sir?”

I followed her to a dustbin by the *Krishnachura* trees. I shuddered when she dug out a small bundle of rags from beneath the rubbish. She hugged and kissed it saying, “My darling, my sweet.”

She sat there quietly for some time and then threw the body into the dustbin again and said, “I bought a tin of barley with the money you gave me the other day. I fed that barley to my son. I had some myself with the hope of having some milk at my breast. But no, it did not happen. My darling could not have a drop of milk in these three days. And he left me just today. It’s good that he left. I hope in his next life he is born to some well-to-do people. At least, he’ll have some milk.”

The woman went off to beg and I took her child and walked toward the cemetery.

On my way, I saw the Hindus and the Muslims fighting with stones and bricks. I stood and watched them with the child’s

corpse in my hands. But these zealously religious people had no time to look at a dead child, or notice the mother of the universe passing them by with millions of her emaciated children. They were the worshippers of bricks and boulders.

Weren’t those houses of deities created for the welfare of humanity? Since when have human beings become sacrificial animals for those rubbles? If that’s the reason behind the existence of those buildings, demolish them. Let all humanity gather together under the starlit night sky. Human beings built the temple and the mosque with their own hands. Now just because two bricks have fallen from the structures, should the innocent victims be punished?

Oh, where are you, the youths of our times? You are the only ones that can overcome such adversities. O my fearless brothers playing with fire, the millions of hapless people stand at your door; they seek your help. You are not part of the team of vultures; you are the roaring fire. You belong to no race, no creed. You belong with light, with songs, with integrity. Emerge and help in chasing those vultures away.

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POETRY

KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM

Proloyullash

The Ecstasy of Destruction

TRANSLATED BY NIAZ ZAMAN

Ring out your notes of triumph!
Ring out your notes of triumph!
The storms of Baisakh come unfurling the flags of the new.
Ring out your notes of triumph!
Ring out your notes of triumph!

Here he comes, the mad dancer, drunk with destruction;
With one shout he shatters the gate on the shores of the seas.
From the cave of death, from the well of darkness,
The eternal executioner comes in the midst of incense and smoke.

Lighting the torch of thunder comes the terrible one,
Laughing his terrible laugh!
Ring out your notes of triumph!
Ring out your notes of triumph!

He tosses his wavy locks, rocking the heavens;
The destructive comet’s tail trembles in fear.
On the breast of the universal Father,
His blood-smear’d sword
Dandles like a child.
In this tumult and commotion the earth grows numb.
The earth grows numb.
Ring out your notes of triumph!
Ring out your notes of triumph!

The light of a dozen suns shines in his burning eyes;
The sorrows of this world are enmeshed in his tangled locks.
A teardrop from his eyes causes
The seven seas to swell and rise
Under his forehead.

Cradling Mother-Earth in his brawny arms,
He roars, “Hail to destruction.”
Ring out your notes of triumph!
Ring out your notes of triumph!

Fear not, fear not. Destruction gathers strength the world over;
The decrepit, dead, and dying flee and hide.
This time after the dark night
Dawn will come, the sun will laugh
In compassion.

In the unkempt locks of the sky shines the infant moon,
His light will fill your room.
Ring out your notes of triumph!
Ring out your notes of triumph!

In his chariot, the eternal charioteer whirls his whip;
The neighing of his horses resounds in the song of thunder, storms and hurricanes;
Their powerful hooves scatter the stars in the blue sky.
In the dead well of the dark dungeon,
The gods are tied to sacrificial stakes
At the stone altar.

It is time for his chariot to appear, its wheels rumbling,
Its wheels rumbling.
Ring out your notes of triumph!
Ring out your notes of triumph!

Why do you fear the sight of destruction?
Destruction is the pain of new creation.
The new is coming to destroy the dead and ugly!
That is why he comes in unkempt hair and dress
Bringing destruction he still comes laughing –
Laughing merrily.

The eternal beauty knows how to destroy and build anew.
Ring out your notes of triumph!
Ring out your notes of triumph!

Destruction and creation are part of his game. Why then are you afraid?
Ring out your notes of triumph!
Wives, hold aloft your lamps of welcome.
The beautiful one comes in the guise of the terrible!
Ring out your notes of triumph!
Ring out your notes of triumph!

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