



FICTION

Reflection

PROTTI RASNAHA KAMAL

My mother has a habit of staring intently at reflective surfaces. When alone, she will look directly into mirrors with a vacant look in her eyes. I am not sure what she thinks of while staring. She doesn't seem natural when she does this, she sits up straight, and places her hands gently on her lap. Her posture is forced, but I assume that stiffness, contradictorily, allows her to release tension in her body. When she takes up

do, mine has many gifts – the most astonishing of which is her voice. I don't religiously listen to her singing, but her voice catches my attention even when I am not listening. It announces its presence every day, at dawn, when the light is just peeking through the dark skies. Her incredible modulations, tone and timbre creates an aura that is heavenly. As the *riyaz* ends each morning, I find myself eagerly waiting

we sat on our patio and sang together, a song where a child asks the moon to bring her mother back to her. She says that her mother had left her when she was asleep, and must have gone to the moon, because that's where people end up eventually. It was a full moon that night, and I remember looking at my mother as the moonlight reflected off her face, in awe of the perfect glow that she exuded.

This morning, I found myself waking up without the usual melodies acting as a trigger. Once I shook the weight of drowsiness off me and got up from bed, I felt quite queasy, as if there was an unknown spectre hovering over my body and imposing thoughts onto my mind. That sudden burst of intuition, the one that almost always forms a knot in your stomach, hit me hard. I dragged myself up the stairs towards my parents' room, anticipating the encounter with a truth that I might not want to meet face to face.

I quickly entered the room, not really caring about waking anybody up. I identified the figure with the ability to create the more soothing sound, and shook her gently. Within a second, she opened her eyes. With keen focus, and a perplexed facial expression my mother looked on until I broke the silence.

"Ma, why couldn't I hear your voice this morning?"

My mother tried to smile a little, but gave in to her rigid facial muscles. She got up quickly and said, "Didn't feel like practicing today," and turned away from me. I didn't say anything, and walked down the stairs and back to my little room.

The rest of the day unfolded as it always does, only today I did not let my mother escape my periphery. I noticed something was off – her glow, that wonderful aura that usually surrounds her was gone. I wanted to let my father know but he was busy, the only word that fully described him. Today,

however, he was busier than usual. He called home early from work to say that he wasn't coming home tonight. My mother waited for an explanation, but my father wasn't one to give any. She was visibly distressed by this new information, but she was calm. She kept her voice low, and I could just make out two words that left her mouth before she hung up the phone – "her" and "why."

The two words haunted me for the rest of the day, and I didn't know the reason – I felt like they appeared everywhere I went, like that spectre that had its power over me last night.

At dinner, I saw my mother staring at the stainless steel bowl that held rice for quite some time. Again, she was in her usual posture, which embodied constraint and grace at the same time. I wanted to feel bad for her today, but something told me not to. I felt this sudden urge to be selfish – to not care about how she felt at all. As these thoughts raced through my mind, I felt a sudden rush of pure bliss. My face must have lit up as a reaction which distracted my mother and caused her to look up. She looked at me as if she didn't recognise me at all. After a few seconds, she smiled.

"Do you know something?" she asked with her lips still stretched out.

"What, Ma?"

"You look exactly like your father."

After dinner I went back to my room, still embodying the blissful energy. It must have affected my mother too since I noticed she hummed a tune while doing the dishes. When I was about to walk upstairs from the kitchen, my mother rushed toward me and hugged me from behind. I let myself relax in her arms, and when she finally let me go, she touched me lightly on my head and asked me to go to sleep.

I did as she had asked me to do right away, I did not toss and turn. I slept so peacefully, that even dreams did

not dare disturb me. As dawn came, however, I realized something was unusual. I heard a tune, but not the usual intricate melody, but a simple tune, the lullaby that my mother sang to me when I was a little girl. I wondered why she started the day with a lullaby, and as my curiosity was piqued, I ran upstairs and barged into my mother's room. I reached the bed and as I was about to yell "Ma!" I stopped in my tracks, dumbfounded. I could hear the lullaby, loud and clear, but my mother was still sleeping. Her smile from last night never left her lips, and she looked as beautiful as I remembered her to be. With the tragic tune as a background score, I tried to shake her awake, for I was scared, so very scared of what I was starting to realize.

I stepped back from the bed, and followed the words of the lullaby in my head. It comforted me, just as my mother did when she would put me to sleep. I felt the tune all around me, but as I stood there, the tune started to converge at a point, at its source. I could hear the booming sound from the right, and as I turned to look in that direction, I caught myself looking at a reflection.

I was looking at a mirror, but the reflection was not mine. The figure in the mirror was the most beautiful thing I had ever laid my eyes on. As I looked at her I suddenly felt something pulling my legs, guiding me to take a seat. I felt as if I was not in control of my own body, but I went through with the motions. Shortly, I was stiff all over, my hands fell onto my lap and I couldn't take my eyes off of the alluring woman sitting right in front of me.

Since then, my mother and I have been separated by just a piece of glass. I am forever bound to her, bound to her reflection.

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this position, the clocks tick away and the sun sets in the horizon, and yet she does not budge. My father thinks she just admires herself quietly, but I think she doesn't look at anything at all.

Some may assume she is easily crippled by her daydreams, but her apparent lack of focus on her daily deeds does not take away from nourishing her talents. As all mothers

for the next dawn.

But before dawn comes, the night emerges – and I have spent quite a few nights laying in my mother's lap listening to her lullabies. When I was very young, the tune was simple, and the words made no sense to me. As I got a little older, my mother started to share with me songs with a story to them, most of them tragic. One time

REVIEWS

Nazrul beyond Bangla

A BOOK REVIEW BY SHAHID ALAM

Kazi Nazrul Islam: Selections, Volume 1, Niaz Zaman, ed., Dhaka: writers.ink, 2020

Kazi Nazrul Islam needs no introduction to those familiar with Bangla literature. He and his works are, for cogent reasons, less known in other circles. Niaz Zaman, educationist and prolific writer, is an active member of a group known as The Reading Circle, which is involved in matters literary. For one of its monthly meetings it chose to have a reading and discussion on Nazrul's poem "Bidrohi" (The Rebel) in both the original Bangla and its English translations. The group concluded that "the translations could not do justice to the original. (They) are difficult at the best of times, and "Bidrohi," with its declamatory tones, its fast pace, its heady rhythms, makes translation into English close to impossible." Something invariably gets lost in the process of translation, but The Reading Circle decided to go ahead and try to translate some of Nazrul's writings. A few tricky glitches had to be overcome on the way, but, with Niaz Zaman as the able editor, *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Selections 1*, has seen the light of day. And literature aficionados, particularly those to whom Bangla might as well be some gibberish from outer space, but English understandable, should be the happier for it.

As the title indicates, this is the first volume of a two-part publication. Zaman's hope is that, "the two volumes of *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Selections* --- the first volume containing poems, songs, and dramatic pieces, the second containing prose writings, fiction and non-fiction --- will finally see the light of day." Amen to that! In the first volume, appropriately containing works that Nazrul is most known for, there are 101 entries that are grouped according to the following wide-ranging categories: Autobiographical Poems, Poems on Equality, Islamic Poems, Hindu Devotional Poems, Love Poems, Political Poems, Poems on Nature, Miscellaneous

Poems, Autobiographical Songs, Love Songs, Patriotic Songs, Songs on Nature, Islamic Songs, Hindu Devotional Songs, and Dramatic Poetry.

A fairly lengthy and informative, at times introspective, Introduction lays out different aspects related to the book, besides discussing several of the contents contained within. Some of the pieces are very familiar, others less so, but, nonetheless, carrying the unmistakable stamp of Nazrul's style and genius. Some fiery lines and pieces will fairly leap out of the pages to hit the reader's inner self and the reader, should s/he be familiar with the originals, would acknowledge that their translations were done with feeling and dexterity. The translators form a diverse group --- some rather well-known in reading circles, others less so, but their effort is not lacking. The readers will be the judge of their endeavours, but the person not conversant in Bangla will at least get a fair inkling of what the popularly known "Rebel Poet" is all about. Translators like Sajid Kamal, Niaz Zaman, Fakrul Alam, Kaiser Haq, Ayesha Kabir, Nashid Kamal, Razia Sultana Khan, Haroonuzzaman, Sanjukta Dasgupta, and Jaydeep Sarangi will have seen to that.

The Introduction contains insightful materials and is quite helpful in understanding Nazrul and his endeavours in life. He wrote some fiery pieces, as well as many dealing with love and beauty besides devotional matters, all the while working hard to make ends meet, until he fell silent for a long time before death mercifully relieved him of his agony. For a man of his writing ability, he found it, like a number of other prominent writers, rather tough going. He once said, "A soldier's life is a hard one. But I labour a thousand times more to write." That military life contributed to the heart of

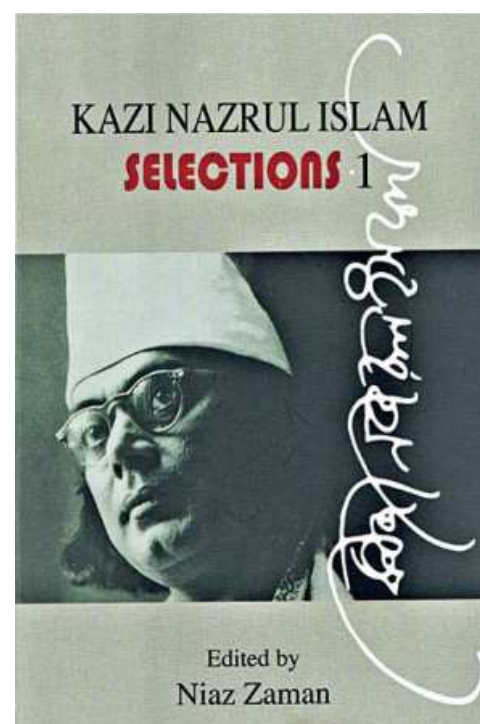
several of his poems and prose. "Bandhon Hara," for instance, notes Zaman, "provides a fairly detailed account of what life was like in the Karachi barracks for a Bengali.... Nazrul describes the hardship of army life as well as its camaraderie." She continues, "While Nazrul's life in the army gave him material for his writings --- immediate themes for his short stories but also images, metaphors and emotions that he would use later in his poems and songs --- his experience in Karachi also introduced him to Communism."

All those experiences contributed to the writer and person that Nazrul was to eventually become. His versatility encompassed both his life and works. He wrote many of his pieces spontaneously, and his most famous poem "Bidrohi" (The Rebel) was no different. Zaman elucidates on this poem and the poet this way: "While the title "Bidrohi" means "Rebel" and the poem does talk about shattering all forms of oppression and discrimination --- secular, political, societal, religious --- the poem is also celebratory. It eulogizes man's humanity, his creativity, his ability to withstand pain, as well as his ability to savour the beauty of life and nature." She starts the collection with this poem and as one goes through it (Kaiser Haq's translation), the ferocious words grip the mind as it hears them, and reverberates in the reader in the memorable concluding lines:

I am the eternal rebel hero ---
Alone, my head ever high,
Rising far above Earth.

The second piece is also another of Nazrul's poems that resonates in one's mind: "The Comet." Sutapa Chaudhuri's translation reverberates:

Even today, on the wounded bosom of creation, God trembles in terror,



Lest His Creation became mightier than the Creator and devour Him!

The third selection is another Nazrul classic: "The Ecstasy of Creation," translated by Sajid Kamal:

In the ecstasy of creation
came forth smiles and tears,
freedom and bondage,
words from deep within my heart,
and the joy of bitter pain

On my right is a newborn, on my left a decaying corpse."

"I Sing of Equality" is translated by Sajid Kamal, and is a poem that, like several others, contains very profound thoughts:

Why do you search for God in vain within the skeletons of dead scriptures when he smilingly resides in the depths of your immortal heart?

Fakrul Alam translates another iconic Nazrul piece, "Mankind," which begins with these words of a common humanity:

"Of equality I sing"
Selina Hasib deals with Woman (Nari) that contains these touching lines:
All beauty that lies in flower and fruit
Has been filled by a woman with love and care and joy.

Man has brought the unbearable heat of the scorching sun;
Woman has brought peaceful night,
light breeze and gentle rain.

Niaz Zaman translates "Ode to Equality": the poem Equality that ends with these lines: "Clad though in soiled or dusty garb,
All are happy here."

"Poverty," translated by Fakrul Alam, ends with these seemingly melancholy lines: Even to this day I hear the *shehnai's* overture wailing.

Seemingly saying: Nothing, there is nothing!

There is a plethora of riches in the 101 selections contained in the book. There has been no lack of effort on the part of the translators and the editor. They have seemingly spared no effort to bring some of the works of an iconic Bangali poet to those unable to read or understand Bangla, but who read and understand English. It has been a worthwhile venture and one can only eagerly look forward to Volume 2 of *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Selections*.

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