

ESSAY

Why Nazrul was at loggerheads with language purists



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

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I proposed a panel at a North American Bangla literary conference. ‘Is translation itself a form of activism?’ I queried. Or rather, the title was ‘Onubaad-o ki ek dhoroner activism?’ Although I withdrew myself from the conference in the end, the English word in the Bangla title ruffled the feathers of a Toronto-based Bangla literary magazine editor. He insisted that I substitute ‘activism’ with shakriyotabaad. One can mark his chivalric anxiety about safeguarding the chastity of the Bangla language.

But does the Bangla term convey the intended message? Is the audience familiar with it? How many words do we use in our daily speech that are original Bangla? Native Bangla is limited to household tools such as dhecki (paddy

husker), kula, etc. For business and official purposes, we generally use Arabic, Persian, and Urdu words assimilated into Bangla like sugar in milk. Kazi Nazrul Islam, in his time, regularly raised the ire of linguistic purists for using Arabic-Persian words in his writings. To his amusement, he quipped, “Well then, from now on, I may use ‘bicharaloy’ instead of ‘adalat’, but what will I replace ‘nazir’, ‘peshkar’, ‘ukil’ and ‘moktar’ with?”

Like the English word in my panel title, Nazrul infused English expressions like ‘non-violent’, ‘non-co’ or ‘non-cooperators’, and ‘propaganda’, inter alia, into his poetry and prose. ‘Ankora joto non-violent non-co-er dol-o non khushi’ [Nor are the raw non-violent non-co-operators pleased with me], he defended his political position as a poet

in “Amar Kaiyiat” (My Explanation). When he adapted English expressions, did he contaminate Bangla?

Nazrul impregnated Bangla with borrowed words from Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Hindi, and Urdu. When purists perceive foreign influence as a threat to Bangla’s existence, we can turn to Nazrul to understand how loanwords enrich and embellish a language instead of corrupting it.

Nazrul introduced and invented an avalanche of new words of Persian-Arabic roots; some of them stood the test of time while others perished. Through his writings, abundant borrowings blossomed in the tree of Bangla literature, but only a handful turned into apples. When Nazrul used khosh ilhaan to denote the melodious tune of a nightingale, the borrowing

fits effortlessly in a Bangla poem “subh-e-ummiid” (dawning of hope), ‘Pahari torur shukno shakhay/ Gaathe bulbul khosh ilhaan’ [On the dry bough of a mountain tree/ A nightingale sings a melodious tune].

What fascinates me the most is his wordplay. Later, we find Shibram Chakraborty following in his footsteps, particularly in the use of puns. A workshop on Nazrul organised by the International Mother Language Institute and Kabi Nazrul Institute enumerates his play on words. Phrases like andajikaally or supposedly (rhymes with whimsically); ejidi or cruel mirroring daradi or compassionate; bondhujo echoing atmajou or offspring; and Oman Katoli imitating Roman Catholic, etc. offer a window to his witticism.

No wonder Nazrul’s sway over Persian and Arabic grew during his posting in the Karachi cantonment in 1917. There, a Punjabi Muslim cleric opened the world of Hafiz, Omar Khayyam, and Rumi to him. Under the cleric’s care, Nazrul became proficient in Farsi and subsequently rendered the Rubaiyats of Hafiz and Omar Khayyam directly from Persian to Bangla in the 1930s. His knowledge of Islam and Hinduism parallels the two worlds in his poems like “Bidrohi” (The Rebel) where the winged horse called Buraq meets the seven-headed flying horse called Uchchaihshravas, and Shiva’s horn finds Israfil’s trumpet.

Obviously, Nazrul ticked off the purists. Addressing them, he wrote, ‘Hindura bhabe, Parsi-shobde kobita lekhe, O paa’at nere!’ [And the Hindus think: ‘This man uses Persian words in his poems. He must be the worst type of Muslim]. Even Rabindranath Tagore resented Nazrul’s use of the word khun. Khun stands for murder in Bangla and blood in Persian. Nazrul viewed this attack on the use of khun as emblematic of Hindu cultural chauvinism, claims Debjani Sengupta in Niaz Zaman-edited *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Poetry, Politics, Passion*.

At length, Pramatha Chaudhuri had to step in to reconcile the two poets. Drawing a common ground between them, he wrote “Bongo Sahitye Khuner Mamla” (The Case of ‘Blood’ in Bengali Literature). It is not unlikely for Chaudhuri to intervene in the language debate given that he faced constant backlash from formalists for spearheading a colloquial language movement. His *Sabuj Patra*, a literary journal founded in 1914, transformed Bangla prose from Sanskritised sadhu bhasha into the colloquial chhalito bhasha.

In other words, Bengal is not unfamiliar with resistance to linguistic change. But language is an organism whose growth and change mark its life. It is a river obstructing whose flow with the dam of codified rules and artificiality causes its death.

This article draws from the English rendition of Kazi Nazrul Islam’s poetry from *The Rebel and Other Poems* translated by Basudha Chakravarty.

Shahroza Nahrin co-translated *Life and Political Reality: Two Novellas* (HarperCollins India, 2022) with V Ramaswamy.

FICTION

The Rakshushi by Kazi Nazrul Islam

TRANSLATED by Zerin Alam

‘It’s been two years today, a full two years, and it continues to amaze me that people run for their lives the moment they see me. I keep on wondering why they avoid me like the plague. Even men, who as you know make such a show of strength when they enter the andar mahal, frightening away the small children with their commands and overbearing manners inside the women’s quarters, these very men slink away when they see me. They quickly abandon their hookahs and feel an urgent need to go into the inner quarters. And women! Why, when they spy me, they drop their water pots and flee. Children are terrified. They scamper away till they are at least a thousand yards from me. Then they start yelling, “O God, the mad rakshushi is here! Run, run for your lives! She will eat us up, eat us up!”

‘Why do they act in this way? Whose rice paddy have I destroyed? Whose mouth have I filled with fire? On whose daughter’s bosom have I broken a burning pot? Which innocent children have I devoured? Tell me, Sister, what right do they have to say all sorts of things about me? Whom have I attacked? Killed?’

‘Yes, it is true that I killed my husband. And did I just kill him? I chopped him up with a dao. Why should this upset them so much? It’s not as if I snatched away their husbands from their bosoms or killed their husbands. Why are they

so bothered then? Are they my kith and kin? If they behave like this, I tell you, I will really turn into an ogre. With one blow of my machete, I will separate their husbands’ heads from their bodies. I will cut open the women and take out their hearts and livers and chop them into fine pieces. Then I will really turn into an ogre.

‘Who drove me mad? These very people have driven me mad. I wanted things to be normal. I tried to set up my home and lead a regular life. But these people kept on continuously whispering in every nook and alley, muttering at every gathering, talking about me at the bazaar and at the mosque, constantly saying I was a witch. They gave me dirty looks, frowned and scowled at me, spat at me. They drove me insane. It is these people

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who have increased the pain that I had buried deep inside my heart and held it up in front of me. Tell me, whose fault is it that I am mad? Crazy? If you constantly torture someone and the person goes mad, who is to blame—the person who has gone mad or the sane people



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

who pushed her off the edge?

‘I had a husband once, a very simple man, straight as an arrow. He was an honest-to-goodness person with no knowledge of ruses or tricks. He used to work in the fields, and I spent my days catching fish, husking paddy and winnowing rice. If I had not helped out, how would we have managed, Didi? I had three children to take care of. My eldest, a son, was grown up and ready for marriage. The girl too had shot up and the little one, the baby of the family, had just started to talk. I am happy to say, Sister, that even though we were

very ordinary, humble folks at the bottom of society, thanks to all your blessings, we didn’t suffer from poverty. Your Bindi used to be able to get hold of some fish or snails or oysters to go with the vegetables for our everyday meals. My son helped out by earning a little every day. My eldest daughter would go out with the village women and bring back fish and greens. We managed to buy some salt and oil with what we didn’t need. My husband too earned enough so that we never ran out of rice the whole year. Ah, what a happy life I had! The goddess Lakshmi seemed to be smiling at us.

‘And for whom was all this? For my family, wasn’t it? I never cooked more than a seer of rice every day. I didn’t want to spend everything at once lest my children suffered later. I gave my husband and children the rice, while I made do with the water of the boiled rice, the starch that remained. After all, in what does a woman’s happiness lie? We are happy when our children are happy. What more does a woman want? It didn’t matter that we didn’t own land; we never had to beg or steal or starve. I was even able to save some money. I was happy that I could feed my family and

on occasions a number of guests and a few beggars as well. Ah, Didi, these things filled my heart! But the village folk used to call me miserly because I never wasted any money. What did I care? I didn’t give a fig about what they thought. I was a thrifty housewife, and I had to ensure my children’s future. They did not know the responsibilities I had. I had to arrange the weddings of two daughters and a son. This mud hut of mine would become an abode of happiness, a little bit of Heaven if you wish, where I would invite my future sons-in-law and my daughter-in-law. Wouldn’t you say this would cost me a considerable amount? I had to save for the future. If I needed money would anyone have lent me any? I knew that if the serpent of penury had coiled itself around Bindi’s neck, not one of my neighbours would have offered me any help. I understood that the people around us could not stand me. They envied this small happiness I had. They were jealous of my family.

“Rakshushi” was first printed in the anthology *The Demoness: The Best Bangladeshi Stories* (1971-2021), edited by Niaz Zaman. Read the full translation on *The Daily Star* and *Star Literature’s* website.

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