

ESSAY

# The flute player

**Nazrul, with his strong overpowering emotions and richness of imagery continues to haunt with eternal truths. While many still continue to hum his songs, do we dream of his utopia, believe in his vision?**

MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

"I sing the song of equality—  
Of a country where fresh joy blossoms in every heart

And new life springs in every face.  
Friend, there is no king or subject here,  
No differences of rich and poor."  
(From Nazrul's "Samya"/ "Equality", translated by Niaz Zaman, *Kazi Nazrul Islam Selections 1*)

What a perfect world did the rebel poet visualise!

And yet, between Tagore and Nazrul's birth anniversaries, when I should be revelling in their uplifting words, I find myself pondering over a novel, *Spellcasters* (Niyogi Books, 2023), by Rajat Chaudhuri. What is very exciting about his work is not just the poetic flow of words, or the plot, but the fact that the climate outside with its erratic changes is internalised in the chaotic storyline and the murkiness of characters. Nazrul's wondrous imaginings seem to be asphyxiated by a smog. *Spellcasters* has no unsullied heroes, unlike the Bidrohi or the rebel, painted in Nazrul's poetry, who as Professor Fakrul Alam translates, sees himself as "Soaring over the

Destruction", translated by Fakrul Alam.)  
These lines are a direct call to replace decadent dogmas with a new world order. Is this still a felt need?

A hundred years ago, Nazrul and Tagore tried to change norms with their writings and their actions. Tagore's family historically wrought changes in religious, social and economic norms. In *Jorasanko* (2013), Aruna Chakravarti tells us, Rabindranath's grandfather travelled across seas breaking the biases of yore against foreign travel. His father founded a new religion—Brahmoism. Tagore's own generation stepped out of purdah.

Nazrul went a step further. He married a Brahmo widow in 1921 despite objections. His poetry rang with the need to transcend religious divides, poverty, and supported women's rights. Professor Niaz Zaman has written of how Nazrul published Begum Rokeya's writings in his journal, *Dhumketu*, and supported feminism. In his 1926 essay, "Mandir O Mosjid" (translated as "Temples and Mosques" by Sohana Manzoor for *Borderless Journal*) while highlighting the redundancy of religious divides, he wrote against the maltreatment of a woman in dire straits, thus encompassing beyond creed, the needs

indigestion, politics, and inadequate salary in the list of excuses for being late. And yet, there is no attempt to change.

Is this the same torpor that Nazrul and Tagore faced as they tried to bridge gaps? In Tagore's "Anondodhara Bohichche Bhubone", the first verse of this song captures the vastness of the universe, while the second reads:

Why do you sit in isolation,  
Dwelling on self-centred issues?  
Look around you and expand your heart.  
Petty sorrows are insignificant.  
Fill your vacant life with love for humanity.  
(Translation from *Borderless Journal*.)

**The highlight comes in the middle of the poem which disrupts the flow of the poem. It needs to appear after the following two lines: 'Fill your... Borderless Journal'. There will be a full stop after 'Journal'.**

In *A History of Sriniketan: Rabindranath Tagore's Pioneering work in Rural Reconstruction* (2022) by Uma Dasgupta, the professor points to the apathy of villagers who refused to repair a road for they had no carriages to ride. Tagore tried to instil a sense of purpose into their lives by urging workers in Sriniketan to sound a "note of joy" in their work to inspire the apathetic populace to act in the interest of leading a better quality of life.

Nazrul, who himself was not born affluent, wrote to wrench hearts out of apathy with his descriptions of poverty. In his poem "Daridro" (translated by Fakrul Alam), he writes:

"I haven't been able to give my dear child,  
My loved one, a drop of milk!  
Familial duty is no delight! Poverty is intolerable,

As it cries endlessly as one's son or wife  
Clasping one's door! Who will play the flute?

Where will one get radiant smiles of bliss?"  
Nazrul and Tagore both often described a flute player or poet who would change the world... Was Nazrul referring to himself as the flute player, a harbinger for a world with "[n]o differences of rich and poor"?

In his fiery 1923 speech against the injustice of being jailed, where he started, "I am accused of treason. Hence, I am a prisoner of the state, as indicted by the state..." he goes on to give us the analogy of the flute, "If you snatch away my flute you do not kill my music, for I can take up another flute, or create a new one, and bring the music back to life. The music does not belong to the flute, you see, it exists in my soul, and in the art of my fashioning of the flute." (translation by Radha Chakravarty, *Selected Essays: Kazi Nazrul Islam*).

Does the flute still inspire the need to fashion similar notes?

Nazrul, with his strong overpowering emotions and richness of imagery continues to haunt with eternal truths. While many still continue to hum his songs, do we dream of his utopia, believe in his vision?

"Oh, golden girl of a golden land,  
Will you be my boat's pilot?  
Row my broken boat onwards  
To the promised land!"

(From Nazrul's "Kon Kule"/ "In Which Shore", translated by Fakrul Alam.)

Mitali Chakravarty has founded an online journal *Borderless*, which has published its first hard copy anthology, *Monalisa No Longer Smiles: An Anthology of Writings from across the World*. She has recently brought out her first collection of poetry, *Flight of the Angsana Oriole: Poems*, which is available in *Bookworm, Dhaka*.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

POETRY

## Mor ghumo ghore elo monohar

KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM

In my deep sleep, you came, my love—  
I bowed down to you and adored you.  
In Shraavan clouds dances Notohor,  
in Shraavan clouds he keeps dancing  
to the rhythm, in ecstasy.  
Sitting close, you bestowed kisses,  
you landed deep kisses on my eyes.  
In a trance my feature beamed,  
my frame effloresced—  
O my flower, the peerless beauty, my love.  
I offered you all flowers from the garden,  
all the flowers from my inner Arden,  
O my heart, my soul, my god.  
But you didn't accept the flowers,  
you didn't embrace my worship.  
Tranced and dazed,  
you untied my flower-studded bun.  
You flitted away for what I emitted in a dream,  
you left for my babbles in a dream.  
I woke up and called out my god, weeping,  
I called him with eyes moist with tears—  
O my love, my soul, my heart.  
In my deep sleep, you came, my love...

Translated from Bangla by Mohammad Shafiqul Islam.

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DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA



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world, all alone, head forever held high". The characters in *Spellcasters* seem to slither in a miasma, moulded out of polluted air. It has the same turbidity as seen in the *The Three-Body Problem* (2006) by Liu Cixin from across the border—from a country where despite repeated historical attempts to smoothen out all colours of culture under a nationalistic umbrella, words continue to diversify shades. Other than the obvious need to create an awareness or record events for posterity, are these projections of what apathy can do to humanity, the apathy that both Nazrul and Tagore rebelled against in their own ways? Will facing dystopian realities bring us closer to realising utopian dreams?

As the errant mind wanders back to the last century, trying to make links, one wonders if writers were not caught in this dilemma earlier? Recall Nazrul's lines:

"Why fear destruction? It's the gateway to creation!  
The new will arise and rip through the unlovely.  
Hair dishevelled and dressed carelessly,  
Destruction makes its way gleefully.  
Confident it can destroy and then build again!"

(From Nazrul's "Proloyullash"/ "The Frenzy of

of the poverty stricken and also of an abused woman, "I saw a thin, 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 in the world. The woman said, 'I can't even give him milk and he has just arrived. I have no milk in my breast'. I heard the voice of the world's mother in hers... 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.'"

Nazrul's essays, stories, and poetry seem to voice protest to move towards the realisation of his utopian vision. Current day proponent of social change, Rajat Chaudhuri, in an interview while discussing the solarpunk movement visualising ecological utopias where nature and technology are in harmony, urges rising out of torpor to act. This need for action finds resonance in modern poetry too. Take for example, a few lines from poet and publisher Kiriti Sengupta's poem in a light vein, "From Being Late in Calcutta": "As soon as you mark me/ I'll talk about events...I'd say crowded buses invite passengers/ from unscheduled halts...I won't forget to mention how/ a sudden protest/makes the train stand still for hours...I'll explore other issues/ the next time I reach late..." Sengupta includes

POETRY

## Kobi-rani

KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM

I am a poet because you love me  
Your love painted me divine  
The sky, the air, the morning light  
The evening star that bade goodnight,  
On the east, the rising sun  
Towards me they all run  
Because your love came calling  
And for your love my inner self was falling  
Only when your love comes and call  
My wishes find a way in your sudden arrival  
You turn my sword into a flute  
And play me to your tune  
All my offerings are to be placed  
On the altar of your soul soon.  
My words are my laurels, my Queen.  
You have everything that's mine  
I am a poet because you love me  
Your love painted me divine.



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## Apon piyashi

In myself I find her  
She knows me better than myself  
I can hear her footsteps  
In my thirsty desires  
In the parched sky of my soul  
She cries like a pied crested cuckoo  
At night she comes in my dreams to steal moonbeams  
Like the Himalayan partridge  
In the garden of my soul, I see her in loving dark clouds  
In the ominous light, she appears as beautiful as a patient lightning  
In my very own garden  
I offered her a garland  
Only to wake up and see that  
It's just hanging around my neck

Translated from Bangla by Quamrul Hassan.

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