BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

The bard of love and rebellion in prose

Review of Kazi Nazrul Islam's 'Mrityukshudha: Love and Death in Krishnanagar' (Nymphea Publication, 2015) translated by Niaz Zaman

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MOUMITA HAQUE SHENJUTEE

Being a musician who grew up singing and listening to Kazi Nazrul Islam's songs, I was quite familiar with his writing, particularly his diction, figures of speech, and sundry themes. His musical oeuvre includes a vast array of music genres, including ghazal, thumri, khayal, qawwali, kirtan, and many more, which likewise address diverse subject matters. He created mellifluous lyrical songs that delineate passionate love while composing robust protest songs reflecting his rebellious zeal, side by side. He indeed had a "war bugle" in one hand and a "tender flute" in another, as he famously said in his poem "The Rebel" (1922).

One might wonder why I began with his songs and poems while writing a review of his novel. One reason to start with this discussion is to emphasise how skillfully Nazrul weaves together all these diverse themes, ideas, and beliefs into this short novel *Mrityukshudha*, which his songs and poems, across different genres, present separately. He depicts a rebel imbued with Marxist zeal who seeks to raise national consciousness among the poor to fight for their rights and a woman who embarks on a challenging journey to create her identity and change her fate through education and religious conversion, all while narrating a love story that challenges the prevailing societal rules and regulations. He concisely intertwines the themes of nationalism, plight of the subalterns—especially the women and their different mechanisms of survival and small-scale resistance, divisions within people of different religious views and how religion can be used as an oppressive apparatus to manipulate and exploit the sufferers even more and not to mention, love and how societal restrictions may intervene in such a powerful affect.

Another reason I began with this comparative discussion is to highlight how wonderfully poetic the language of *Mrityukshudha* appeared to me, ornamented with his signature literary devices and phraseologies. This brings to mind renowned Romantic poet William Wordsworth's argument in "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads 1800" where he postulates that one cannot differentiate between the language of a good poem and good prose. This idea constantly flashed through my mind while reading the novel. Particularly, Nazrul's preoccupation with similes and metaphors involving natural elements, a common feature in his songs and poems, recurs in his depiction of various characters, settings, and incidents throughout the novel. Furthermore, his incorporation of songs from time to time adds another layer of poetic essence to this novel.

ILLUSTRATION: **MAISHA SYEDA**

Although the novel is simply structured with 28 chapters, it contains a subtle, intriguing division. The story begins with a family in Krishnanagar, struggling with extreme poverty as they literally die of hunger. Three unnamed daughters-in-law live with their children, the mother-in-law, and Paykale, the only surviving son of the mother-in-law. The first half of the novel highlights the intensity of their poverty and suffering. The second half introduces another family: Latifa and her fugitive brother, Ansar. Ruby, a widow and Ansar's love interest, is also introduced in this part. This section focuses on Ansar's revolutionary activities and Mejo Bou's efforts to change her destiny. She converts to Christianity after being shunned by her community for receiving education from Christian missionaries. Later, she reconverts to Islam as her son dies, and she needs to feed the children in the 40-day rite. Meanwhile, Ansar is imprisoned. The novel ends with Mejo Bou's vision of educating the village children and Ansar's final days of amorous love with Ruby, who comes to look after him breaking all the social boundaries and prejudices.

Interestingly, Ansar does not appear in the novel until chapter 15. After his dramatic entrance, Mejo Bou's new identity as an educated Christian woman named Helen is revealed. This subtle division within the plot symbolically showcases that change and revolution become inevitable when exploitation reaches its zenith. Ansar emerges as a messiah of humanity, under whose influence, voiceless people dare to speak. Ansar's emergence and his death, hence, appear as a deft structural design in the novel.

Published in 1930, a turbulent time in world history, Nazrul's narrative captures the zeitgeist of that period. He includes direct and indirect references to significant events of that time, such as the Russian Bolshevik Revolution, the national resistance movement against the British in India, and Gandhi's non-cooperation movement. However, what struck me most is how predominantly it is about Muslim people and their culture. This is remarkable because when he was writing, Muslim representation, especially of the lower social strata, was rare in the Bengali literary canon. Nevertheless, he does not do so to elevate any religion over others; rather, he seems to criticise any religious venture that exploits people. The incidents of Maulana pushing the impoverished family of Mejo Bou to further poverty by suggesting they sell all their goats and contribute 15 rupees as penance for Mejo Bou's conversion, or Mejo Bou's feeling of being shackled by new ties despite adopting an educated identity as Helen after conversion, reflect Nazrul's stance against manipulative religious manoeuvres. After all, Nazrul is known as a writer of humanity who believes in the emancipation of people from all forms of restriction and exploitation by those in power, whether social, religious, or political.

One cannot finish reading this translated novel without feeling profound gratitude towards the translator, Dr Niaz Zaman; there is no doubt that Nazrul's writing is complex. Moreover, he uses local people's dialects so authentically that sometimes the general people of Bengal might miss the overt and covert meanings. Zaman translates those difficult words, phrases, and even slang with lucidity. Additionally, she includes footnotes to help readers understand the cultural and historical context of Bengal at that time. She has definitely made a significant contribution, not only to the Bangladeshi literary canon but also to world literature. Although Nazrul is a powerful revolutionary writer who seamlessly blends love and revolution in his work, he remains largely unknown worldwide. It is now an intellectual responsibility to celebrate his writing both locally and globally as much as possible.

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BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

I'm with the band (vicariously)

A look into Lizzy Goodman's 'Meet Me in the Bathroom' (Faber & Faber, 2017) and the confessional power of oral history

ARSHI IBSAN RADIFAH

I was born too late for CBGB's, too offline for MySpace and too far away from dive bars. I came to all of it two entire decades late so The Strokes wasn't exactly the soundtrack to my reckless twenties but a band I happened to stumble into during a mid-pandemic spiral.

I wasn't in New York in 2001, stumbling out of Mercury Lounge or sweating through some chaotic Lit Lounge afterparty. I was just disgustingly stuck home in 2020, headphones pressed so tight to my ears it felt like they were holding me together. And as I watched my world shrink to four walls, The Strokes' 2001 album *Is This It* felt like a door.

There's a particular kind of ache that curls itself into the pages of *Meet Me in the Bathroom*. Not nostalgia exactly, because you can't really be nostalgic for something you never lived through. It's more of a juvenile, secondhand yearning for a time long gone. Lizzy Goodman's oral history of New York's early-2000s rock revival reads more like a scrapbook: dog-eared and contradictory, a chorus of half-truths and cigarette-stained memories, and mythologies being constructed in real time.

The book is a labour of love; it ended up taking six whole years to write because Lizzy Goodman was personally sitting down and interviewing all these musicians separately, and then trying her hardest to edit practically thousands of hours from about 200 interviews into a concise book that is, well, a little more than 600 pages. Goodman made the creative decision to pen it down as oral history instead of a memoir, so the entire book is a transcription of these conversations, an endless stream-of-consciousness narrative of Name-colon-dialogue. She admits the project nearly killed her.

I scoured every nook and cranny of the internet for a pdf version of this book almost immediately after my required binge of every video of The Strokes I could physically find on the internet, and I came up empty, satiating myself with every little chunk and peek I could find on reddit threads and magazine reviews as I messaged every single book page I knew on Instagram.

So when I finally picked up *Meet Me in the Bathroom*, I wasn't looking for accuracy. I didn't want another Wikipedia entry of bands and venues and historically accurate anecdotes—in a naïve way, I just wanted an 'in', albeit in a metaphysical and vicarious sense of the word, I'm afraid, but I was extremely eager for any access to the capital b-Before: to the borrowed couches where entire albums came to shape, before the internet turned coolness into a currency and Julian Casablancas looked visibly exhausted in every photo. And the fact that it came to me in the form of a book annotated with gossip straight from the horse's mouth was perhaps the best part.

Especially in a post-internet era, where personal memory is endlessly fragmented and curated by feeds, 'explore' pages and disappearing stories, it is now that the idea of a shared memory, of a communal version of the past, feels more valuable than ever. It is that itch of wanting to desperately hold on to an experience before it slips away. In the book, Steward Lupton of Jonathan Fire*Eater described it perfectly

ILLUSTRATION: **SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM**

Goodman knew this instinctively. Her own insider status mattered because it gave her emotional skin in the game (along with the backstage passes). She grew up alongside a lot of these people, getting handed flyers for their gig on a random Tuesday night. She knew Nick Valensi "as a kid", "mothered" him through early demos—and even then, she couldn't predict that The Strokes would become the voice of a generation. That proximity is what makes her recount stand out. She's not assuming things from across the hotel bar, nor is she peering in through a window. She's right there, bleary-eyed at 3 AM, trying to make sense of the noise like everyone else.

For me, that's the hook of anecdotal literature: its authenticity is not tied to dates or precision, but to the people who are trying to remember said dates. It is extremely fractured and unreliable but that unreliability is what makes it stand out. Memory bends and betrays and it's not supposed to be clean. But it feeds the part of us that wants to live vicariously through other people's lives, real people's lives. Handing out access codes into worlds I wasn't cool enough, old enough, or lucky enough to belong to. Goodman says in the introduction for the book, "We were all—every kid in the crowd and every person on stage—chasing the same thing: a feeling of rebellion, of possibility, of promise, of chaos," and it resonates, even if I was never sweating it out in the Mercury Lounge. It's still just as electric.

Especially in a post-internet era, where personal memory is endlessly fragmented and curated by feeds, 'explore' pages and disappearing stories, it is now that the idea of a shared memory, of a communal version of the past, feels more valuable than ever. It is that itch of wanting to desperately hold on to an experience before it slips away. In the book, Steward Lupton of Jonathan Fire*Eater described it perfectly when he said it felt like having, "nostalgia for an hour ago." Perhaps that is why we crave oral histories the way we do, that's why we are drawn to the Kim Gordons and Legs McNeils of the world. We lean in when a rock star admits to being broke, scared, or petty, lingering even as they describe the age-old story of how heartbreak made them write better.

In a 2018 interview published in *The Stony Brooke Press*, Lizzy Goodman explains why she chose to do an oral history, "It's supposed to feel like a time capsule... It's not reported fact. [...] The hope, then, is that the truth exists for the reader in being able to internalize the sensory, absolute value truth of what happened." Goodman herself described her role not as historian but as translator: she wasn't chasing objective fact, but "emotional fidelity." It's like being handed a stack of scribbled in diaries and being told, "go on, figure out what happened." It's like trying to make sense of a chorus of unreliable narrators and in doing so I felt oddly tethered to a time I was never actually a part of, when New York was gritty and golden.

I think that's why we keep returning to memoirs and autofiction like these. Not for the facts, but for the permission to treat our own lives like folklore. Memoirs and oral histories hold that promise.

There's something romantic about visiting a time just out of reach. To believe that one day, someone will stitch together our fragments, our anecdotes, our best and worst nights, and call it history. It does not have to be the official story, just the echo of what it felt like to live it.

And *Meet Me in the Bathroom* lets us believe that—for almost 700 pages, at least.

Arshi Ibsan Radifah *is a literature major who loves unreliable narrators and Wes Anderson movie sets. If she had it her way she would have liked to play bass for a girl band in the '90s, but for now she'll suffice by rewatching* Empire Records.