

ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

ESSAY

Symphonic overtures of Nietzsche-Marx-Bakunin in Nazrul's 'Bidrohi'

MOSTOFA SARWAR

Kazi Nazrul Islam's Bangla poem "Bidrohi" (first published in January 1922), in *Bijli* magazine during British colonial rule, is more than just anti-imperialist literature—it is a striking philosophical rendition. The poem's protagonist—the pervasive "I"—directly confronts political, social, religious, metaphysical, and economic authority, calling for an egalitarian society.

"Bidrohi" stands out in world literature as a synthesis of three philosophical streams: Nietzsche's Übermensch, Marx's class consciousness, and Bakunin's anarchist vision. It is noteworthy that during the time of its composition, Nietzsche and Bakunin were not widely discussed among Bengali intellectuals, as Bangla translations were rare. A few English translations were known to some western-educated Bengali intellectuals. On the other hand, Marx had an exceptional presence in India, as the Communist Party of Bengal was formed in the early 1920s under the leadership of Muzaffar Ahmed, with whom Nazrul was closely associated. Therefore, while Marxist influence in "Bidrohi" is understandable, the philosophies of Nietzsche and Bakunin appear in Nazrul's work through his own spontaneous creativity. Thus, the philosophical fervour of "Bidrohi" is Nazrul's own—his original contribution. In this essay, I will analyse how "Bidrohi" functions as a meeting point of these three philosophies and presents a holistic vision of liberation and freedom that remains equally relevant today.

In Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* (1901), "will to power" is described as the fundamental element of life. At its core lies the desire for mastery and self-transcendence. The idea of "self creation" is emphasised in *The Gay Science* (1882) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). His call—"Become what you are"—is the process of reshaping oneself and

overcoming all constraints.

From Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*, we have an idea of his philosophy, which explains "Self Creation" as its existential goal. Nazrul's "Bidrohi" firmly declares the spirit of self-affirmation. The rebel denounces all laws, traditions, customs, or dogma. Like Nietzsche's Übermensch, the protagonist of "Bidrohi" declares his inalienable right to do anything his mind directs him to do. The poem's "I" isn't an imitation mimesis of Nietzsche's—it's representation is a unique force majeure, which is unfathomable even by the Almighty. The tone of the poem is all-out rebellion against any authority, power, mandates, culture, or historical memory. The hero of the poem trashes modesty, humility, and submission, and it is an absolute self assertion of the highest form. He declares:

"Say, Valiant,
Say: High is my head!"
Even the highest peak of the Himalayas
seen bowing before the poet's uplifted
head:

"Looking at my head
Is cast down the great Himalayan
peak!"

The indomitable 'I' is cruel, cursed, and arrogant without responsibility whatsoever. He presents himself as an uncontrollable and destructive force of nature:

"I am irresponsible, cruel and arrogant,
I am the king of the great upheaval,
I am cyclone, I am destruction,
I am the great fear, the curse of the
universe."

In the following lines, we see an extreme rebellion against traditional religious authority, the Almighty, and a determination to place himself and his own power at the highest point:

"Say, Valiant,
Say: Ripping apart the wide sky of the
universe,
Leaving behind the moon, the sun, the
planets

and the stars
Piercing the earth and the heavens,
Pushing through Almighty's sacred
seat

Have I risen,
I, the perennial wonder of mother-
earth!"

Nazrul's "Bidrohi" is not merely a political insurgent but a philosophical self-declaration—where Nietzsche's self-creation becomes a universal metaphor.

Although the Rebel's temperament is Nietzschean, the purpose of his rebellion is Marxist. It appears that the protagonist of this poem is announcing his own greatness, but, allegorically, he represents suffering humanity, i.e., the world's proletariat. As the vanguard for the struggle of the oppressed, this poem's 'I' wants to break all the laws imposed by the ruling elites. In the realm of antagonistic contradictions, the emancipation of India against imperial Britain demands rebellion, breaking the chain, and destroying the oppressive norms. I found this vivid class consciousness in "Bidrohi".

"Weary of struggles, I, the great rebel,
Shall rest in quiet only when I find
The sky and the air free of the piteous
groans of the oppressed.
Only when the battle fields are cleared
of jingling bloody sabers."

It may be noted that a few years after

"Bidrohi" was published, Nazrul's poems

such as "Bhanger Gaan", "Samyabadi",

"Sarbhabara", "Jinjir", "Praloy Shikha",

and "Kulimajur" express direct Marxist

themes—class consciousness, proletarian

unity, and anti-exploitation revolt.

Between Nietzsche's self-affirmation and Marx's revolutionary goal stands Mikhail Bakunin's anarchist philosophy.

Bakunin, a "mad lover of freedom,"

argued that true human liberation is

possible only through rebellion against all

external authority and coercion—state,

capitalism, private property, and religion.

Nazrul might not be aware of Bakunin's

anarchist philosophy because there is no

Bangla translation. Still, his protagonist, Bidrohi, becomes an antagonist who issues a clarion call to destroy the socio-political structures, existing morality, and social constraints. It appears that the spectre of Bakunin possesses Nazrul. As Bakunin said, destruction is the precondition of creation.

"I have no mercy,
I grind all to pieces.
I am disorderly and lawless,
I trample under my feet all rules and
discipline!"

As Bakunin said, destruction is the precondition of creation; Nazrul alludes to Durjati, the Hindu Lord Shiva, who destroys to create. We find that Nazrul independently reinvented anarchism as a philosophical tool for a noble dialectical process where destruction and creation complement each other. In fact, Nazrul elevated anarchism to a higher level of authenticity:

"I am Durjati, I am the sudden tempest
of ultimate summer,
I am the rebel, the rebel-son of mother-
earth!"

Say, Valiant,
Ever high is my head!"

We can conclude that Nazrul's poem "Bidrohi" is not only a breakthrough literary contribution in Bangla, but also that its philosophical underpinnings place the poet in the pantheon of the greatest creative geniuses of the world. The impact of this poem resonates in the rise of Gen Z's rebellion across different countries.

All the quoted fragments of "Bidrohi" are from Professor Kabir Chowdhury's translation that can be found on the *Nazrul Institute* website.

Mostofa Sarwar is professor emeritus at the University of New Orleans, former visiting professor and adjunct faculty at the University of Pennsylvania, and former dean and former vice chancellor of Delgado Community College. He can be reached at asarwar2001@yahoo.com.

POETRY

Violence bears no apostrophes

SNATA BASU

Spectral land—you are bleeding hollow;
flesh and bone
at the precipice
of ruin,
of cold erosion,
of televised despair: the lynching of a naked man,
there is no easier way to word this—
this is the breaking of our land.
Violence bears no apostrophes, we rot in dog years.
It is history, euthanised.
It is declarative
of what has been sold
through the slow death
of conscience—what does it inherit?
who would it rather be
in an alternate tomorrow
disintegrating
beyond this civilisational scar.
we build past these eulogies—mourning this
bleeding soil,
and if silence remembers the ways in which
it is haunted—if it remembers at all,
may it forever haunt
the death of the soul.
This haunting of a womb half-given



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

and half-owed
must remember
the carrying. The invisibles
are the sacred of the earth.

Snata Basu is a writer based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her poetry has appeared on numerous literary platforms including *The Opiate*, *Visual Verse: An Online Anthology of Art and Words*, and *Small World City*.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

As a woman I have no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.

— Virginia Woolf

Peeking into authors' mailbox: My year of reading letters

IFTEHAZ YEASIR IFTEE

I never considered reading authors' letters. "How can personal letters be considered literature?"—I thought. It felt like a cash grab by publishers, scraping the bottom of a dead author's drawer to sell whatever was available. How could letters be anything more than small talk and errands?

But this year, mostly by accident, I ended up diving into the world of letters by some of my favourite authors. And I realised I was wrong. If reading novels is like watching a performance, reading letters is like sitting in the dressing room while the actor takes off their makeup. It is unpolished, vulnerable, and terrifyingly real.

It started with Rabindranath

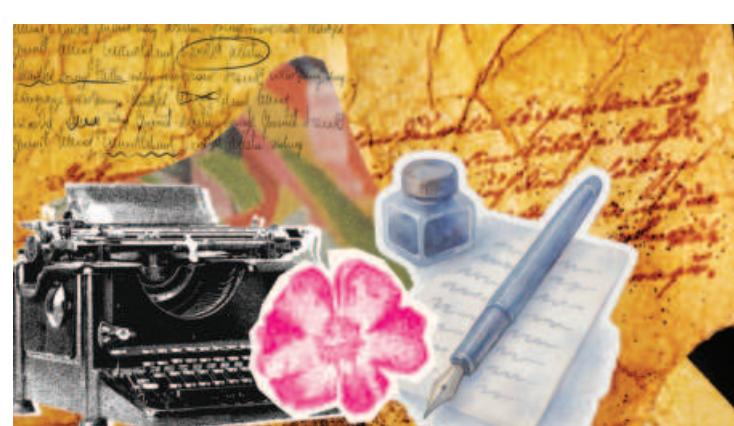


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

Tagore's *Chinnopotro* (Visva Bharati, 1912) back in April. I picked it up expecting obscure philosophy, but instead found a young man drifting on a houseboat by the

Padma, totally enchanted by the

world. These were not lectures; they were snapshots. Tagore writes about the monsoon clouds and the Padma river with such intimacy that you feel like you are sitting next to him on the deck. It grounded me and helped me heal. In a year that felt fleeting and monotonous, *Chinnopotro* was a lesson in slowing down and actually looking at things.

Then I moved to the complete opposite end of the emotional spectrum with Franz Kafka's *Letters to Milena* (S. Fischer Verlag, 1952). If Tagore was at peace, Kafka was in an unadulterated panic. Reading Kafka's letters is like watching a friend self-sabotage in real time: desperate, anxious, deeply in love, and yet terrified of

that love. Oddly, it was comforting to see a literary giant so exposed on paper. It made my own anxieties feel valid, almost human.

Finally, I read *Humayun Ahmed-Koyekti Chhithi O Ekti Diary* (Anyaprokash, 2013) by Sahana Kayes. This one felt closer to home. We grew up with Humayun Ahmed as a kind of mythical storyteller, the man who created Himu and Misir Ali. But seeing him through his letters, and through Kayes's framing, stripped away the myth. It was raw and domestic. It reminded me that authors aren't gods; they are just people who feel things intensely and write them down. Initially, I got to know about this book from a radio show, and couldn't help buying a copy. I

would urge anyone who is a fan of Humayun Ahmed to give this book a very worthwhile read.

This year of "eavesdropping" through authors' mail changed how I read. I stopped looking for perfect plots and started looking for honest voices. Letters aren't written for an audience; they are written for one person. Because of that, they hold a kind of truth that fiction can not touch. It turns out some of the most revealing things writers leave behind are not in their manuscripts, but in the notes they scribble to the people they loved.

Iftehaz Yeasir Iftee, a student at IBA, University of Dhaka, is a featured poet in the global anthology *Luminance* under the pseudonym Brotibir Roy.