

Bridging the Divide: Kazi Nazrul Islam and Nationalism

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Abstract

In my essay I have tried to show how Kazi Nazrul Islam wielded the all-important weapon of language to give impetus to the cause of Nationalism. The argument is based on the premise that the dynamics of creativity, the quality of imagination and the question of memory that are associated with creative writing cannot be ignored. Literature deconstructs memory if only to construct new memory to be further renewed and transformed by the receiver's mind. Today, seven decades later after the independence of India, as we try to recover a sense of what the experience of nationalism actually meant to the people, we need to turn to the many layers of histories that lie submerged beneath the official history.

Keywords: nationalism, colonialism, freedom-struggle, independence.

‘Metaphor interprets memory,’ says Cynthia Ozick when she discusses how metaphor presses hard on language and storytelling and is at the core of the use of language. The extraordinary and appalling experiences and sometimes everyday practices make way into expression in the language of communication which in turn reach out to others, to influence, ignore and take action. The question then comes to my mind: should we disregard the great examples of creative literature as ‘non-history’ or take them up as imaginative and creative reproduction of history where writers uncover the reality surrounding them together with the reality of the past together with actuality and memory, events and legends? Each creative text is a unique

representation, a powerful metaphor of a specific memory or experience. Each story, event, observation is a distinct metaphor seeking to give tangible shape to some facet of the historical phenomenon of Indian Nationalism.

In my essay, I have tried to show how Kazi Nazrul Islam wielded the all-important weapon of language to give impetus to the cause of Nationalism. The argument is based on the premise that the dynamics of creativity, the quality of imagination and the question of memory that are associated with creative writing cannot be ignored. Literature deconstructs memory if only to construct new memory to be further renewed and transformed by the receiver's mind. Today, seven decades later after the independence of India, as we try to recover a sense of what the experience of nationalism actually meant to the people, we need to turn to the many layers of histories that lie submerged beneath the official history. Here Nazrul Islam becomes important. Feelings, emotions and expressions are some of the important things that make up the history of an event. Creative writing, I believe, explores possibilities of various kinds of truths rather than establishing any facts with a finality. For what is truth? Events are not static. Each event has a different interpretation. In other words the perceived, that is the event, recorded by the perceiver and it differs from on to the other depending on socio-economic, political and cultural perspective.

The Indian nationalist movement that developed in Bengal during the last quarters of the nineteenth century was dominated by high-caste Hindus. These men primarily came from the Brahmin, Kayastha and Vaidya castes and played important roles allotted to the Indians in the administration of the British Raj, in professions and in the cultural canvas of Bengal. The Indian National Congress for its first thirty years made no persistent efforts to bring under its fold Muslims and low-caste Hindus or to build a mass organization. The Muslims were much slower to gain Western education in Bengal. Bringing together all the Muslim residents in Bengal as an ethnic category was a difficult task. Many of those in the small Muslim elite

were Urdu speaking and did not consider themselves as 'Bengalis'. The model followed by them were the Arabic and North Indian aristocratic, cultural, and religious ones. Appeal was made to the Great Tradition of Islam and prestige was given to Arabic names, descent from the Prophet, membership in the Ashraf, or upper class Muslim community of India. Bengali speaking Muslims often had an insecure identity, they felt they lacked distinctiveness because they were mainly illiterate and peasants and both the Hindus and Urdu speaking Muslims looked down on them. In the 1920s some of the educated among the Bengali Muslims began to fight back against those, Hindus and Muslims, who derided them. Although one trend was to learn Urdu and assimilate the great Tradition of Islam, another was to assert that Bengali was their language and they would continue to use it and to write creatively in it. Several literary groups flourished at Dhaka University and one poet emerged whom the entire Bengali literary world hailed as a master: Nazrul Islam. The noted poet Buddhadev Bose wrote in *Acre of Green Grass*, Calcutta, 1948, that Nazrul Islam's appearance synchronized with that great upheaval in Indian life known as the first non-cooperation movement. He went further to say that in Bengal, people found in him a voice of the moment. Freedom from bondage was the keynote of the poems of his first phase. The poems were wild, exuberant and intoxicating. Like Dwijendralal Roy and Satyendranath Dutta before him, he wrote with equal passion on Hindu and Muslim subjects. His mind cherished and nourished on the legends and myths of both religious groups and was equally home with Goddesses Kali and Kamal Pasha. The *Dumketu* dated 17th October 1922, carried an editorial on Kamal Pasha. The editorial went on to say that the Indians have been incited to take up violence in preference to their policy of non-violence if they would sincerely intend to liberate India, under the cover of paying tribute to Kamal Pasha for armed and sturdy resistance for the recovery of the lost Turkish dominions. 'Kamal Pasha' was reprinted in the eighth issue of *Dhumketu*, dated 12th September 1922. It also carried a special section entitled *Muslim Jahan*

(the Muslim World) which would be dominated by the news about the continuing success of the followers of Mustafa Kamal Pasha fighting against the Greek invaders and Nazrul's comments in this section put stress on such subjects as heroism and success of the Kamalities against the Greeks.¹ Nazrul was inspired by Kamal's uprising for national emancipation and eulogised the Turkish war of liberation in poem called *Ranobheri* (War Trumpet).² The central message of *Ranobheri* was armed struggle to death for freedom. In an introductory comment written in prose below the poem's title, Nazrul proposed to send ten thousand volunteers from India to the Government at Ankara to fight the Greeks. Thus, Nazrul made it clear that his support lay with the nationalist Turkish government instead of the puppet Sultan of Istanbul.³

Born into a Muslim middle class family, Nazrul Islam received religious education and worked as a muezzin at a local mosque. He got initiated into poetry, drama and literature while working with theatrical groups. After his maktab education and the priestly job, Nazrul received a very different kind of experience that had a great liberalizing influence on his mind, opened him to more free thinking and that later ignited the poetic spark latent in him. The ill paying job together with the sameness of village life led him away from the Islamic institutions to something very un-Islamic but quite creative, artistic, better paying and above all colourful. This was provided by the theatrical groups in which he worked as a composer of songs and dance dramas that were full of Puranic, Sufi, Vaisnava, Baul and secular traditions in Bengal's rich folk culture. He also dealt with historical topics such as *Akbar Badsha* and social themes such as *Chasar Sang*.⁴ After serving in the British Indian Army, Nazrul established himself as a journalist in Calcutta. He joined the staff of the *Bangiya*

¹ See 'Muslim Jahan' sections in 'Dhumketu', vol 1, nos 8, 9 and 12 (September 14, 15 and 26, 1922).

² 'Ranobheri' *Nazrul Rachonabali*, vol 1 p. 33.

³ See Roderic H. Davison, Turkey: Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1968, *passim*.

⁴ Rafiqul Islam, *Jiban o Kabita*, Mullick Brothers, Dhaka, 1982, p. 11.

Mussalman Sahitya Samiti. Round about 1921 he produced a bunch of poems that included a number of romantic pieces. But most significantly these contained at least four songs of national awakening, calling for heroic sacrifice in the cause of nation's freedom.⁵ The immediate cause of this change seems to have been the non-cooperation movement launched by Gandhi in 1920. The unprecedented agitation shook every nook and corner of the British Raj. The poet was immediately drawn to the political reality and its predicament slowly crept into his poems giving them a new force, energising and bringing dynamism to everyday words. The tempo continued till January 1922 by which time he composed a series of biting poems that earned him the epithet of *Bidrohi Kobi* (Rebel Poet). At Comilla, Nazrul not only composed songs for the ongoing non-cooperation movement, but he himself participated in the agitation as it engulfed the town. He was repeatedly approached by local leaders to compose song for the occasion. The poet became a popular figure in Comilla's political circles and the leaders gathered at the railway station to bid him farewell for Calcutta soon thereafter.⁶

A number of preoccupations held Nazrul's mind in quick succession in the later months of 1921. Revolution in Turkey, Marxism with Muzaffar Ahmad, news of non-cooperation movement as well as family involvement all found a tumultuous expression in *Bidrohi*, (*The Rebel*). It was composed during one night in the last week of December, 1921, at 3/4C Taltala Lane, Calcutta. When *Bidrohi* was published its impact was intense and far reaching. The spirit of the poem matched the mentality of the people fighting for independence. In other words the poem created a sense of urgency transcending all boundaries of caste, creed and religion,

‘...I am the burning volcano in the bosom of the earth,

⁵ The four songs were ‘Bijoy Gaan’(song of victory), ‘Pagal Pathik’ (*Crazy Traveller*), ‘Maron Baron’(Welcome to Death) and ‘Bondi Bandonā’(Salute to the Prisoners). All these were later included in Nazrul's ‘Bisher Banshi’ (*Flute of Venom*), 1924, only to be proscribed by the colonial government.

⁶ Ahmad, Muzaffar. *Kazi Nazrul Islam Smritikatha*, 5th ed, National Book Agency, Kolkata 1981, pp. 66, 80, 213.

I am the wild fire of the woods,
 I am Hell's mad terrific sea of wrath!...
 ...I am the rebel eternal,
 I raise my head beyond this world...'

(Translated by Kabir Choudhury)

The meter of *Bidrohi* is also reflective of the turbulent time and the restive character of the poet. The meter in the poem is free verse which was pioneered in Bengali in the 1860s by Michael Madhusudan Dutta. It was further developed by Rabindranath Tagore and other poets, but all of them used it in *aksarbritto* (letter-based) and *swarobritto* (sound-based) and never in *matrabritto* (accent-based). That was left to Nazrul and he did it with success.⁷ Poet and critic Jibannanda Das (1899-1854) felt that the topsy-turvy times could be unmistakably reflected in free *matrabritto*. All three styles of free verse were used by Nazrul to give life to his words, metaphors and allusions in some of his exalted poems.

Bidrohi was eagerly seized upon by the managers of two journals—*Moslem Bharat*, a monthly and *Bijoli*, a weekly. *Bijoli* published it on 6th January 1922, coinciding with non-cooperation movement. 'Moslem Bharat' would not publish it till late February and in between the two publications it was reprinted in the prestigious *Probashi*⁸. The rebellious theme and language instantly hit the Bengali literary world and the twenty-two year old Nazrul shot to a glorious height of a national bard.

Around this time, that is the time of the composition of *Bidrohi*, Nazrul also produced *Bhangar Gaan*, (*The Song of Destruction*), at the request of Basnti Devi (1880-1974), wife of C. R. Das (1870-1925) who had just been taken into custody (10th December, 1921) and she took charge of his weekly *Banglar Katha*. He followed it up by writing such poems such

⁷ Syed, Abdul Mannan. *Chhando*. (Metre). Dhaka: Aboshar Prakashana Smastha, 2001. pp. 81, 143-147. Many others think Rabindranath Tagore first introduced free verse in Bengali. Even Syed has contradicted himself on this point in an earlier writing, *ibid*, p. 143.

⁸ Ahmad, Muzaffar. *op. cit.* pp.119-120

as *Proloyullash (Delight of Annihilation)*, April, 1922, *Dhumketu (Comet)*, August, 1922, *Raktambara-dharini Ma (The Mother in Red Robe)*, August, 1922, *Anandamoyeer Agomone (On The Arrival of the Goddess of Delight)*, September, 1922, *Shikol Parar Gaan, (Song of Enchainment)*, April, 1924, *Bidrohira Bani (The Rebel's Message)*, April, 1924 and 'Jihad' (*Tempest*), June-July, 1924, may be identified as Nazrul's poems of rebellion.

In 1922, Nazrul started a bi-weekly himself with a paltry sum of money from a stranger and called it *Dhumketu, (Comet)*. He wrote to several famous personalities asking for messages for the new journal. Eight such messages were printed in the first issue of *Dhumketu*. Tagore welcomed it in a beautiful quadruplet and wished: 'Awaken with a flush of light/ Those who are half-conscious.' Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay wished for 'fearless truthfulness' and Barindra Kumar Ghosh writing from Pondicherry, wished for 'exposure of all hypocrisies'.⁹ Extract from weekly report of 24th August 1922, of I.B.File-288/22: A bi-weekly newspaper entitled *Dhumketu (The Comet)* edited by Kazi Nazrul Islam...is openly preaching Bolshevism and urges the people of Bengal to resort to violence. The Calcutta Police are dealing with the matter. Another extract from weekly report of 31st August 1922, of I.B.File-288/22: The district of Bakarganj and Pabna report the circulation of *Dhumketu*, and in the former district it is reported that the people are reading it with great interest. This Publication is most pernicious and should be immediately suppressed. His activism led to his imprisonment by the British Authorities. Extract from weekly report of 28th January 1923, I.B.File-288/22: Kazi Nazrul Islam, editor of the *Dhumketu*, was convicted and sentenced on the 17th January 1923, to one year rigorous imprisonment under section 124A. I.P.C. by the chief presidency magistrate. On April 14th, 1923, he was transferred from the jail in Alipore to Hooghly. He began a forty-day fast as a mark of protest against the jail superintendent for his mistreatment towards him. Eventually he was released from prison in December 1923.

⁹ *Dhumketu*, Vol 1, No 1, 11th August, 1922, p. 2.

While in Prison he wrote *Rajbandhir Jabanbandi*, (*Deposition of a Political Prisoner*). His works were banned in the 1920s by the British Authorities.

Nazrul Islam was a mass oriented revolutionary, a passionate advocate of religious and ideological harmony as reflected particularly in his contribution toward better Hindu Muslim relationship. In 1920 Nazrul expressed his vision of religious harmony in an editorial in *Yugabani*. There he invited the Hindus, Muslimms, Buddhists and Christians to come together as brothers, transcending the barriers of narrowness, lies and selfishness. In another article entitled *Hindu Mussalman*, published in *Ganabani* on September 2nd, 1922, he wrote: 'I can tolerate Hindus and Muslims, but I cannot tolerate the Tikkism and Beardism.' Here both 'Tikki' (orthodox Brahmins sported a tuft of hair on their head to identify themselves as nobles and high caste and different from rest of the Hindus) and 'Beard' are symbols of orthodoxy and fundamentalism in both Hinduism and Islam. Nazrul was an uncommon voice of Islam, proclaiming universal values of peace freedom and cooperation, while repudiating any exploitation and bigotry in the name of religion. But his radicalism was not shared by a large number of Bengali Muslims. In fact, his genius attracted some Muslims and many of the literati and politically left, were Hindus. In *Amar Kaifiyat* (*My Explanation*), which was published from Calcutta in 1926 in a volume called *Sarbohara* the poet said that the revolutionaries thought him to be non-violent and resented his poems dealing with spinning wheels, the Brahmins regarded him as an atheist, some considered him as a follower of Confucious, those who fought for Independence of India did not like him, many preferred him to be with Europeans.

This is an eye opener. He transcended all socio-religious boundaries and it was difficult for the general masses to read a visionary, a man who wanted not only political independence but independence from small religious orthodoxy which divided the society horizontally and vertically and made the cause of independence difficult. In course of an

article dwelling on the oppressions committed by the rich on the poor, by the strong on the weak, the *Dhumketu* (Calcutta) of the 24th November 1922, (page 78), wrote ‘they frown at you wishing to keep you bow down by the strength of their guns, by the power of their taxation, by their sentries...say only for one day that you are not servants and that you (rich men) cannot live without us...’ In the darkening horizon of the ever growing rift between the Hindus and Muslims, Nazrul Islam sounded a clear warning:

Are they Hindus or Muslims? How dare you ask this?

Oh commander, tell them men are drowning, sons of our mother...

Durgam Giri Kantaro Moru

Nazrul articulated the aspirations of the downtrodden and criticized the socio-economic and political system that brought upon the misery. His poem ‘Daridryo’ reflects his view:

O poverty...

...you have given me courage

opened my inner eye and gave me a sharp-biting language

my curse has transformed my violin into sword...¹⁰

He became a critic of the Khilafat Movement, condemning it as hollow, religious fundamentalism. His rebellious expression extended to rigid orthodoxy in the name of religion and politics. He also criticized the Indian National Congress for not fighting for outright political independence from the British Raj .He became active in encouraging people to agitate against the British rule. He joined the Bengal state unit of the Congress party.

Nazrul was a poet who desired to use his poetry not as a source of pleasure only for a chosen few, but as a weapon for waging war of emancipation. His writings direct and simple fired the minds in bondage. He had neither the ironic self-detachment nor the conversational

¹⁰ Translated by Sharmila Ray. *Rachonaboli* Vol 1, p 357

tone. His images are concentrated visuals which act and depict, influence and mobilize. Despite his occasional lapses into verbosity, his words have eyes and hands that feel, touch and urges one to go on. It does not matter whether his poems are polished or unpolished, the fact remains that they never failed to communicate. They moved to the periphery of one's emotional life. To Nazrul freedom was a wider concept, for apart from political freedom it included freedom from rules and conventions, bonds and chains.

'I bend my head to none except myself.' This is self-reverence and self-confidence rather than egocentricity. The 'I' is not selfish or arrogant. On the contrary the poet had identified himself with the suffering humanity. His body of writings stimulated the mind, altered the totality of one's personal and public view and opened it to new truths which challenged the dominant ideological, cultural and political systems and therefore, created the backdrop so necessary for freedom struggle.

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Sharmila Ray is a poet and non-fiction essayist, writing in English and anthologized and featured in India and abroad. Her poems, short stories and non-fictional essays have appeared in various national and international magazines and journals. She is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of History at City College, Kolkata. She has authored nine books of poetry. She conducted poetry workshops organized by British Council, Poetry Society of India, Sahitya Akademi. She is the Vice-president of Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library. She has been reading her poems in India and abroad. Her poems have been translated into Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Slovene, Hebrew and Spanish. Currently she is working on a manuscript of non-fictional essays. She may be contacted at sharmilaray25@gmail.com.