Kazi Nazrul Islam's Poetry and the Affairs of Contemporary Life

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Abstract: Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh, was born in 1899 and lived until 1976, though he lost mental capacity in 1942. His poetry focuses about human life and everyday struggles. His writings at the shook the pillar of British oppression over the Indian subcontinent, empowering people of his time and continuing to inspire oppressed groups. Michal Joseph Oakeshott (1901-1990), a political philosopher of the twentieth century, considers the role of poetry in human life in his essay 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind'. His conclusions here can be applied to Nazrul's poetry. This article examines Nazrul Islam's conception of the role of poetry with Oakeshott's view, noting how pertinent Nazrul's poetry is to some major concerns of contemporary life.
Keywords: Oppression, Voice of Poetry, Poetry for Humankind, Revolution, Voice for Oppressed People.

Introduction

Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), the rebel poet of Bengali literature, is one of those rare creators who dedicated his life to portraying the essence of the life along with suggestions of rectifying purifying people's life patterns in the desired manner. This process was exercised with aesthetic validity without being completely didactic. Nazrul Islam became known known as the Rebel Poet of Bengal immediately after the publication of his towering poem "The Rebel" (*Bidrohi*), where he proclaimed his independence, analogous with individual liberty and collective freedom of Bangali. Nazrul's ultimate destination was an admixture of love, justice, and liberty of humanity, as defined nations with their diversified identities as well as cumulative integrity as humankind. This is how the individual 'I' of Kazi Nazrul Islam became a universal 'I', symbolising his nation and humanity across the globe belonging to no particular bend of time.

Oakeshott and Poetry

In one of his most incisive essays, 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind', the late Michael Joseph Oakeshott (1901-1990), one of the few outstanding political philosophers of the twentieth century, details his view of the role of poetry in human life.[1] This essay correctly places poetry in the unique position it has unofficially occupied in the cultural evolution of humankind. Oakeshott, however, while having sought to focus on human beings in general, mediated exclusively on Western sources. Had he gone beyond the West, he might have encountered Nazrul Islam. With that encounter, Oakeshott would not only have returned to examine more deeply and widely the poetry of the West, but he would have also expanded the role he associated with the voice of poetry.

Oakeshott's view is that the voice of poetry resides outside of humanity. It is the human activity that engages in the making and moving of images—an activity which seeks not to provoke either moral approval or disapproval, nor to communicate an emotional experience or evoke such an experience in others. Rather, it expresses something unique; the uniqueness of the self. That self that is not communicable in advance cannot be chosen. Moreover, because of its uniqueness, it cannot imitate the voice of practice without risking becoming a counterfeit. So, the voice of poetry is fresh and delights in movement; it is a voice that shapes a disposition. While poetry reflects itself in its unique utterance, it seeks not the assimilation of other-selves or to confirm or refute another, but to "evoke another and join…to compose another and more complex image of the same kind."[2]

Notably, the activity and the organ providing for or making possible that activity do not exist in isolation. They exist in relation to the broader universe, including the organisms that exist within it. The expression that poetry is shaped by may include a sense of community in the face of crippling alienation. A careful reading of Oakeshott suggests that even in his

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[1] Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), pp. 488-541.

[2] Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*. p. 540. See also, Cristopher MacGowan (ed.), *Letters of Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions Books, 1998), p. 117.

identification of the voice of poetry, the element of the practical is overlooked.

Identifying that your expression is similar to that of others with others is perhaps very practical; it may be the only way human beings find a proper sense of orientation, a sense of community, and, most importantly, a sense of unity. Indeed, this recompense can be the basis for social bonds, although it is not always accepted. This aspect is highly relevant to the work of Nazrul Islam.

Discussion

Nazrul Islam did not advance any explicit academic theory concerning the voice of the poetry, and as such any position he may have had can only be extrapolated from his body of work. Inferring and deducing from Nazrul Islam is not difficult, as his work is rich, complex, and highly personal. 'The Rebel', 'The Comet', 'The Ecstasy of Creation', 'My Answer', and 'Complaint' are partially or wholly autobiographical. Here, Nazrul expresses his philosophy through the voice of his poems. For him, the ends of the poetry are not only practical—and practical in all the specific senses we had previously touched on—but he would passionately contest our separation or distinction between the practical and non-practical.

With increasing self-awareness, a person also becomes aware of the huge, complex, and overwhelming environment in which they may only ever see themselves as passive objects. Experiencing oneself in this way is to experience oneself without feeling one's own will and identity; it is also to experience oneself as powerless and ineffective. Humans who have given in to conditions that have made them inert and helpless to maintain their survival have never fully accepted those conditions. For this reason, they have always strived to develop a sense of being able 'to have an effect'.

Like any system of socio-cultural control, the dominating social class in colonial empires has always aimed to 'reduce to impotence' the subordinated people. Nazrul was born during the height of British imperial rule in his country. This imperial rule also meant that the Indigenous populace had to maintain a faultless 'Westernized appearance' to maintain social legitimacy. Cultural success and acceptability were directly related to the degree to which subject classes were accepted or rejected. The local culture was seen as a source of alien cultural influence and moral degradation. Nazrul's political poems are firmly against this Westernized appearance. In his poem 'The Ecstasy of Destruction', he uses the images of

storms to make his announcement.

> Ring out your notes of triumph!
> Ring out your notes of triumph!
> The storms of baishakh come unfurling the flags of the new.
> Ring out your notes of triumph!
> Ring out your notes of triumph![3]

'The Coming of Anandamoyee', 'Those Iron Gates of Prison', 'The Tempest of Revolt', 'Mischief in the Name of Caste', 'Helmsman Beware', 'The Invocation of the Prisoners', 'The Tempestuous of Flame' and 'O Pioneers' are poems by Nazrul where he is against Western invasion. These poems exhibit the voice against the colonisers, a key theme throughout his work.

In a society where one's means of economic livelihood, one's source of social advancement (schools, colleges, universities, and even language), and one's sense of self is controlled by others, one can hardly have a sense of effectiveness.[4] This denial created many deep doubts concerning identity and capacity for independent self-assertion among the colonised people of Bangladesh. The voice of poetry expressed the need for rebellion and self-actualisation. In no poem was that need more forcefully expressed than in 'The Rebel':

> I am irresistible, cruel and arrogant,
> I am the king of the great upheaval,
> I am cyclone, I am destruction,
> I am the great free, the curse of this universe.
> I have no mercy,
> I grind it all to pieces.
>
> I am disorderly and lawless,
> I trample under my feet all rules and discipline!...
>
> I am creation, I am destruction,
> I am habitation; I am grave-yard,
> I am the end, the end of the night!...
>
> I shall kill warriors
> And bring peace and harmony to the universe!...
> I shall uproot this miserable earth effortlessly and with ease,
> And create a new universe of joy and peace.

[3] Kazi Nazrul Islam, 'The Ecstasy of Destruction', in *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Selection 1*, ed. Niaz Zaman (Dhaka: University of Dhaka Press, 2020), p. 125.
[4] Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).

Weary of struggle, 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…[5]

The poem agitates against passivity, against being an object. In doing so, it is a call to action, to construct a new identity, to mould a new being. This merciless destroyer of order and law, who tramples underfoot all rules and discipline contrived for the people of Bengal, is also the creator. Like one of his counterparts in the West, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Nazrul Islam believed that one must create from within one's wreck the very thing one seeks and contemplates. In this case, that is a new universe of joy and peace. Nazrul Islam used the voice of poetry to capture what he called the 'mighty primordial shout' and pushed to ensure the individual and collective fulfilment of his people's need for effectiveness.

Nazrul invokes images of typhoons, the roar of the oceans, the rush of the hurricanes, the blindness of cyclones, and the blood lust of warlords to invite the spirit of rebellion. However, this alone was not enough to mobiliae the people of Bengal. The voice of poetry must evoke and compose self and others in all their complexity. Moreover, the materially poor but spiritually complex and wealthy people of Bengal had to have their senses solicited with richness and complexity. Hence, amid images of fire, hell and cyclones, one finds the rebel as the bitter tears of the widow's heart, the pain and sorrow of all homeless sufferers, and the consciousness of the insane who has suddenly come to know themself, after the crumbling of false barriers. Coupled with such counter images, one finds tones of tenderness, longing, sadness, fertility, and innocence all waiting to be liberated in a new day. So, the rebel assumes another identity:

I am the trembling first touch of the virgin,
I am the throbbing tenderness of her first stolen kiss.
I am the fleeting glance of the veiled beloved,
I am her constant surreptitious gaze…
I am the shy village maiden frightened by her budding youth.
I am the soothing breeze of the south,
I am the pensive gale of the east.
I am the deep solemn song sung by the wandering bard.[6]

The search for effectiveness cannot be adequately realised unless and until another human need is at least partially met. That need is what has come to

[5] Kazi Nazrul Islam, 'The Rebel', in *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Selection 1*, ed. Niaz Zaman (Dhaka: University of Dhaka Press, 2020), p. 37, L. 14-153.
[6] Islam, 'The Rebel', L.14-153.

be called 'orientation'. The late Erich Fromm, who elevated this need to its deserved place of pre-eminence, defines it as the need for a "map of (the) natural and social world, without which (one) would be confused and unable to act purposefully and consistently."[7] Fromm explains that "[the human] capacity for self-awareness, reason, and imagination- new qualities that go beyond the capacity for instrumental thinking of even the cleverest animals- requires a picture of the world" and one's "place in it that is structured and has inner cohesion."[8] It is from one's place in it, a fixed point, that one organises all the impressions that impinge on ideas based on modern science, ancestor worship, Marxism, or Buddhism, out of which one shares consciousness with those around them.

Nazrul Islam did not philosophise about the need for orientation; he felt it instinctively. He knew he could not simply seek to uproot the spiritually stifling and morally corrupt political system that sapped his people's strength after denying them a fixed place from their own culture from which they could organise their impressions. Nazrul uses images such as 'the Himalayan peak', 'cyclone', 'earth mother', 'hurricane', 'hambeer', 'chhayanot',[9] 'hindol',[10] 'yamadagni',[11] 'fire-god Agni', 'the goddess Indrani', 'byomkesh',[12] and the wild torrent of Ganga. That place of equality in a renewed Bengal would at once be the citizen of their own country and citizens of the world; they would have a membership as equals in Bengal and the human family after they had forged a union to break the 'false barriers' that had separated people.

Nazrul Islam, like the fifth-century BCE Chinese sage Mo Tzu, who focused on universalism, espoused the human need for unity on a global scale.[13] He carried the message of revolt to the earth and sky against all divisions and sociocultural marginalisation. With the triumph of a revolt, he could sing not only for the equality of human beings, but for "all impediments and differences removed between Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian." He also understood that it is the universal character of things that simultaneously emphasises and gives excitement and significance to

[7] Islam, 'The Rebel', p. 230.
[8] Islam, 'The Rebel', p. 231.
[9] 'Chhayanot' is a Bengali word meaning 'Milky Way'.
[10] 'Hindol' is a Bengali word meaning 'Hanging'.
[11] 'Yamadagni' is mythological character.
[12] 'Byomkesh' means 'Lord Shiva'.
[13] Han Fe, *Basic Writings of Mo Tzu and Han Fei Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 40-49.

individual and particular expressions.

The reader should perceive that while Nazrul Islam's poetry expresses the uniqueness of self or a given thing, it also extends its images "to evoke another to join…to compose a more complex image of the same kind". In 'The Rebel', we see that he used the image of "the trembling first touch of the virgin." That image creates innocence and calls into being "the fleeting glance of the veiled beloved" and the "shy village maiden frightened by her own budding youth" to compose a more complex image of the same kind of innocence. One also finds the same characteristic in his use of the image of changeability and destruction to invite a more complex image of destruction as an agent for new beginnings. One finds that the rebel, who is the great destroyer and cyclone, who crushes under foot "all rules and discipline," and who is at once the graveyard and the end, is as well "the end of the night. . ."

It is within this humanist legacy that Nazrul Islam should be found, alongside Beethoven and Shelley. Beethoven depicts and celebrates human triumph over fate in his Fifth Symphony and triumphantly proclaims the sisterhood/brotherhood of humankind in his Ninth Symphony, culminating in Schiller's "Ode to Joy."[14] In the instance of Shelley, his most relevant work here is *Prometheus Unbound*.[15] Here, Shelley's work recounts how Prometheus, a god representing the human mind, imagination, and will, transfers the power of those faculties to the god Jupiter, who then proceeds to betray, enchain, humiliate, and degrade Prometheus and enslave human beings. With the help of Prometheus, a supposedly all-powerful Jupiter is overthrown, and Prometheus and humankind are free. The poem, whose symbolic meaning is that human destiny is inhuman, will, and imagination, urges the destruction of tyranny (in the form of ignorance, greed, and power) and the creation of a human commonwealth. The closing lines of this poem capture the spirit of Prometheus as well as the moral combativeness of humanism:

> To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
> To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;

[14] 'Ode to Joy' (German: 'An die Freude') is an ode written in the summer of 1785 by German poet, playwright, and historian Friedrich Schiller and published the following year in Thalia. A slightly revised version appeared in 1808, changing two lines of the first and omitting the last stanza.

[15] *Prometheus Unbound* is a four-act lyrical drama by Percy Bysshe Shelley, first published in 1820. It is concerned with the torments of the Greek mythological figure Prometheus, who defies the gods and gives fire to humanity, for which he is subjected to eternal punishment and suffering at the hands of Zeus.

To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love, and bear, to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates,
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This alone is Life, joy, Empire, and Victory.[16]

In 'The Rebel', Nazrul Islam is the modern Prometheus, the destroyer who will rest in peace only until the sky and the air is free of the piteous groans of the downtrodden, enslaved, and degraded. This Prometheus is also 'The Comet', the enemy of all creation (that which is fixed), the revolutionary who defies God and accomplishes "what the hollow stuffed God" could not. He is also the rebel who triumphantly arrives at the gate of a liberated world, ready to begin the creation of the human commonwealth. For him, poetry's voice is the complete imaginary speech that humans can make, with each image making human experience and possibilities more intimate, straightforward, and complex.[17]

The term 'intimate' in this context means more than just 'private' or 'characterised by a close personal connection'. That which is fundamentally universal, unique, and present in the time of living, and even essential to it, has often driven the spiritually awakened person to scream or whisper inwardly is the same thing. "Oh, a moment stay, though art so fair!" Nazrul Islam's poems and lyrics are full of this and cannot be avoided. So delicate and exquisite is the tenderness of his poetry and songs that one wonders if one has been subjected to an unusual visitation or if some part of the self has been dormant for so long that it has been awakened or reactivated. As well as generating the passion and drive that great poetry inspires, these intimate and self-discovering moments serve as the electrical charges (spiritual electricity) that bind people together in joint mobilisation toward common goals. Nazrul's poetry's relevance in the modern world is brought up in the essay's final section.

This significance extends to many areas, including bridging gaps in international and intercultural perceptions, helping to avoid certain forms of human conflicts, supporting multiculturalism, offering reinforcement for human rights and fundamental freedoms, illuminating our sense of human historical evolution, and refining our aesthetic sensitivities. One of the areas

[16] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, LL.1-9
[17] The issue of Nazrul Islam's songs must be dealt with in another essay. Let it suffice to say that he cannot be fully known without careful attention to this songs.

of contemporary misperception in international and intercultural relations is that Islam is an intolerant, parochial, and reactionary religion. Likewise, it is mistakenly claimed that militants within the world of Islam are fundamentalists, which means they seek not only to subject all social, political, and cultural life to an unquestioning acceptance of ancient religious dogma, but also that they are enemies of pluralism and the secular order which has defined and is defined by pluralism. Since the West is, by definition, secular in its cultural emphasis, Islam is, by definition, anti-West. Apart from the fact that such perceptions and claims overlook evidence that Islam, historically, had accepted the persecuted out of Christian Europe, disregarded the sources of Muslim militancy, and fundamentally stereotyped all Muslims, they miscast Muslims throughout the world into an oppositional identity.[18] The poetry of Nazrul Islam, a devout Muslim, which invites Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Hindus to a common identity, is a powerful source to help remove the misperception. In 'We are Steam of Same Flower' and 'Dogmatism is Not My Religion', it is clear how Nazrul brought out the social misconception about religion. Even in the poem 'The Rebel', Nazrul paves the way for religious equality and to solve the misconception.

The removal of the misperception mentioned above may even help to subvert the claim that human beings, having successively exhausted conflicts based on political dynasties, nation-states, and socio-economic ideologies, are now moving toward a 'Clash of Civilizations', the broadest level of cultural identity people have, short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.[19] To Nazrul Islam, these so-called differences of civilization are but false barriers, which the voice of poetry in intended to overcome in the images of the identities it creates. Further, in his use of images from Greek, Roman, Islamic, Hindu, and Turkish cultures, Nazrul sought to demonstrate that one can elect what to emphasise in dealing with peoples of varying cultural backgrounds. These are the supposed 'incompatible differences' that are often conveniently used to divide human groups. He was not unaware of other socio-economic and gender divisions within the human family, either. In his poems 'Woman', 'King and Subjects', 'Coolies and Labourers', and 'Day-Laborers', one finds not only a focus on peace and liberation, but an emphasis on the time when workers (including women)

[18] Mark W. Janis (ed.), *The Influence of Religion on the Development of International Law* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1991), pp. 107-143.
[19] Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993), p. 24.

will win control of their wellbeing and on the unity of civilisations, after removing the cover of artificial painted skin, and ensuring that the pain of one will be the pain of all. In 'Coolies and Laborers':

> Let the high heavens
> Break down into this room of ours.
> Let the sun, the moon, and the stars
> Pour on our heads in showers.
> Let men of all ages and climes
> From every race and country
> Unite and combine.
> And hear the song of Unity.
> Today let us be equal and free.
> And if anybody hits one of us,
> Let us all feel the pain of an equal degree,
> Let the disgrace of one
> Be considered a shame
> To the whole of mankind.[20]

In seeking the unity sought in this work, the voice of Nazrul's poetry does not make light of cultural differences that exist between peoples. He is among the first authentic multiculturalists, and therefore very pertinent to our current emphasis on multiculturalism.

Nazrul Islam's poetry is concerned with effecting linkages between identities to create a new global identity. Its interest is to show that in many, there is also one; that the one does not mean the undermining of the many; and that the citizen of the 'new universe' (after the revolution) has the capacity for empathic interpretation of the many to find, recognise and maintain the oneness of humanity. Nazrul Islam's poetry is also relevant to the single most important international expression to date, the human rights movement.

The principle of human security is linked to the view that the inherent dignity of all human beings, and that the rights associated with that dignity does not only express the moral and spiritual solidarity of human beings, but also represent the moral foundations on which friendly relations between and among countries can be fully developed and maintained. Nazrul Islam championed the claims of human rights, and the voice of his poetry in this area illuminates the lie which is often engaged in when it is said that human rights are the West's cultural gift to the rest world. His poems 'Song of the Workers', 'Song of the Students' and 'Kuli o Mojur' demonstrate Nazrul's

[20] Kazi Nazrul Islam, 'Coolies and Laborers', in *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Selection 1*, ed. Niaz Zaman (Dhaka: University of Dhaka Press, 2020), p. 71.

philosophy regarding human rights.[21]

Far more critical than through that poetry, voice embraces not only the individual human rights that are so carelessly recited, but captures the general conceptual foundations on which individual rights are grounded: equality and non-discrimination, human unity, a single human family, human dignity, human (as distinct from national) security, and mutual vulnerability and responsibility.

Each person, according to Nazrul, is the root of life, with its divine fire, buds of secrets, wisdom, and aesthetic rhythm. Those buds come to flower under certain climatic conditions only. For human beings, their evolution as a 'single people' conscious of themselves—especially as the dignity of human labour comes to be recognized and respected—will represent a unique cultural climate. Moreover, the root of life will yield outcomes about which we have not yet thought. In his poem 'Human Being', one finds him pointing to many of the significant cultural figures of history and noting that everyone may be like them in creative work.[22] In his own words:

> Don't laugh, my friend - the self within us
> is fathomless and infinite.
> Do I - or does anyone what greatness
> may lie within that self ?...
> Who knows what is one's limit or the origin!
> Who finds what path to follow?
> Whom do you hate, brother, whom do you kick?
> Perhaps within his heart
> resides the ever-awakened God!
> Or perhaps he's nobody that important,
> great, or of high esteem--but someone
> who's covered with filth, badly wounded and battered,
> and burning with sorrow.
> Yet all the holy scriptures and houses of worship
> are not as sacred as that one tiny human body!
> Perhaps he'll father- in his house will be born-
> someone yet unmatched in the history of the world,
> who'll deliver a message never heard before,
> whose great power the world has yet to witness.[23]

A more prominent position for people's aesthetic sensibilities in society's

[21] 'Kuli o Mojur' is a Bengali word which means 'daily labour'.
[22] Kazi Nazrul Islam, 'Human Being', *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Selection 1*, ed. Niaz Zaman (Dhaka: University of Dhaka Press, 2020), p. 60.
[23] Islam, 'Human Being', L. 7-23.

design and operation was a fundamental concept of Nazrul. Moreover, the term 'aesthetic sense' is meant to encompass more than just an enhanced sensory response to an appreciation of the refined, the subdued, or the adorned. It is also a stirred and keen sensibility that encourages the purification of negative emotional and psychological states, encourages a disposition to seek out the truth and cultivates a disposition to seek it out.

Conclusion

To Nazrul Islam, the voice of poetry is the image and intimation of and beckoning toward all it can be us. The final area of Nazrul Islam's relevance to contemporary life is that of the pronounced end of history. Nazrul's way of understanding, images, and symbols is so clear to the reader that they are impactful for them. In his poems, it is essential to compare the contemporary world's problems and the solution Nazrul offers for humanity. In short, although history will continue and human beings will populate this earth and Nazrul's poetry will raise their voice to play a role for humankind.