

KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM

A Critical Overview

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

Kazi Nazrul Islam is a household name in Bengal. A towering figure in Bengali literature and the national poet of Bangladesh, yet he is virtually unknown in the West. Why? There are two reasons for this: partly because, as William Radice (*Sampling the Poetry of Nazrul Islam, 1997*) has pointed out, he was a Muslim; and partly due to the fact that he identified himself with the rural poor rather than the elite of the pre-partitioned India. Although Rabindranath Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, Nazrul is unknown in the West, notwithstanding the fact that the latter was arguably more popular with the masses in Bengal than the former. It is high time the record was set straight. Who was Kazi Nazrul Islam? According to late Professor Syed Sajjad Husain, a Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University, renowned scholar and literary critic, “Nazrul Islam is a puzzling phenomenon: a non-conformist, who by his celebrations of traditional religious themes, came to be regarded even by those whose company he would presumably have hated to keep, as the best interpreter of their ancestral faith; a man without any formal education who shows more sophistication than many who possessed university degrees; without ever travelling beyond the sub-continent he acquired an international outlook which might have been the envy of many who, in spite of frequent journeys abroad, betrayed in their writings hardly any awareness of the world outside.” (*Nazrul: An Evaluation, 1997, p69*)

Nazrul was born in May 25, 1899 into a poor but respectable Muslim family in the Burdwan district of West Bengal, India. The Kazi family had migrated from Bihar to

West Bengal during the end of the Mughal rule and received the title of Kazi (judge) from the Mughal emperor, Shah Alam. Nazrul's father, Kazi Faqir Ahmad, an imam of the local mosque, died when he was barely eight and this threw his family into further poverty. Consequently Nazrul's schooling was frequently interrupted. Nazrul's early education began at a local maktab (Qur'anic School) where he learned Arabic and Persian. According to Professor Rafiqul Islam, a distinguished Nazrul scholar, "Nazrul's nickname was 'Dukhu' (sorrow) Mia, a name that aptly reflects the hardships and misery of his early years. His father's premature death forced him, at the age of ten, to take up teaching at the village school and become the muazzin of the local mosque. This early exposure to the principles and practices of Islam was to have a significant impact on his later literary endeavours." (Nazrul Islam, in Nazrul: An Evaluation, p110)

With spells of work as a domestic servant and a baker's assistant, young Nazrul moved from place to place impressing the masses with humour, poetical talent and songs. This was the time of the First World War and the young revolutionaries of the sub-continent (like the Ali brothers), who were keen to liberate their country from foreign rule and occupation, began to unify their people under the banner of the liberation movement. In 1917, at the age of eighteen, Nazrul quit High School and joined the 49th Bengali regiment for military training. The regiment was however disbanded in 1919 and Nazrul returned to Calcutta and began to take his literary activities more seriously.

"His early writings", wrote late Professor Abu Muhammad Habibullah, "which at once set him apart from his generation of writers, were on themes of Muslim tradition and were marked by the generous and very effective use of Arabic and Persian words and expressions were strikingly original. These poems attracted wide attention not merely because of their theme, but also for the resonance of their metre as well as vigour and passion. In one of these poems entitled Korbani, the Muslim festival in which animals are sacrificed and which some Muslim pacifists in those days termed as barbarous, Nazrul Islam defended it as not mere killing, but as a discovery of one's strength and courage, the killing of fear and timidity. In another poem entitled Muharram, the festival of mourning commemorating the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, he called for sacrifice and not for lamenting the murder at

Karbala in the battle for justice and truth. In a poem entitled the Ferry Boat, symbolizing salvation through the cardinals of Islamic faith, there was a remarkable assonance of sublime thought and mastery with words and rhyme evocative of the measured rhythm of the oarsmen.” (The Personality and Poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam, in Nazrul: An Evaluation, p11)

Nazrul’s writings were clear, simple, yet profoundly emotive and meaningful. He spoke from the depths of his heart. He was a sincere man who championed the cause of the Muslims of Bengal yet he shunned racism, discrimination and communalism. He advocated that both Muslims and Hindus should join hands and liberate their country from foreign rule. He wanted the two communities to cooperate and co-exist in peace and harmony. Not surprisingly, a number of his poems and songs incorporated symbols and imagery from Islamic thought and history as well as Hindu culture and mythology. Sounds contradictory? This should not surprise anyone. Nazrul was a product of his age – his was an age of contradictions. His personality and writings were shaped by the contradictory forces of his times, for, on the one hand, Muslims and Hindus despised each other while on the other hand they had to join hands to liberate their homeland from foreign occupation. Nazrul tried to bring the two communities together without them having to give up their cherished beliefs and traditions. Predictably this led many people to question his orthodoxy. In 1914, when Nazrul was the Chief Editor of the Daily Navayug (New Era) in Calcutta, he wrote a long reply to his critics. This was one of his very last articles. In this article, he refuted most of the charges levelled against him by his critics, and he also defended his works as an orthodox Muslim writer and poet.

This, however, does not mean that there were no contradictions in his personality, thoughts and writings. Of course there were many. That was only a part and parcel of the vigorous and, at times, an extremely turbulent and volatile life that Nazrul had led in very difficult circumstances. Even so, the contradictions that are generally discernible in Nazrul’s personality, thoughts and writings are not unique to him. Such contradictions are equally discernible in most other renowned writers, scholars and leaders of the time. Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad is a prime example. He was arguably one of the foremost Muslim leaders of the sub-continent; at once a champion of Islam and a prolific writer yet he was an eminent leader of the Indian National Congress

who strongly opposed the partition of India and Muhammad Ali Jinnah's two-nation theory. Like Azad, Nazrul was a product of the contradictory forces of his age and this, too, is reflected in his life and works. In the words of Professor Syed Sajjad Husain, "How unorthodox Nazrul Islam really was is a question on which hasty judgements must be avoided. It is true that he exercised the artistic right to use whatever material he considered appropriate, with an impartiality which often embarrassed his more orthodox friends. But to maintain that he had completely renounced his ancestral beliefs would be to read into his poetry more than he intended. On the contrary if one examined the entire corpus of his writings one cannot but be struck by his repeated borrowings from Islamic lore and legends. Not that this question should influence our evaluation of Nazrul Islam as a literary artist but I thought the point was worth mentioning in order to refute some of the current notions about him." (ibid, p72)

Nazrul was an outstanding and gifted writer and poet; and as such he defies classification. He was a romantic, revolutionary and equally emotive writer and poet. His natural talent and creative ability enabled him to stand over and above all of his contemporaries. For example, the poet Jasimuddin was a highly educated literary figure who became renowned for his love of peasantry and rural life but, unlike Nazrul, he was not able to transcend his idyllic vision of things. By contrast, the poet Ghulam Mustafa was a devout Muslim who championed Islamic values and practices but, unlike Nazrul's Islamic poetry, his works are devoid of artistic and emotional charge and spontaneity. Likewise, Ismail Hussain Shiraji was a committed Pan-Islamic activist and a revolutionary poet but, unlike Nazrul, his works fail to evoke the Islamic past in the form of powerful imagery and linguistic diction. Like Shiraji, Imdad Ali was very fond of versifying the glorious Islamic past but, unlike Nazrul, he too failed to capture the image of Islamic past in a way so that it made sense to the Muslim masses, irrespective of their social, economic and political background. Just as Sir Muhammad Iqbal (better known as Allama Iqbal) was regarded as the poet and philosopher of the Muslims, Rabindranath Tagore became the poet and philosopher of the Hindu elite whose work hardly appealed to the majority of the people of Bengal, especially the Muslim and Hindu peasantry. Being the indomitable voice of the masses, Nazrul tried to strike a balance; thus his writings directly reflected the hopes, concerns and aspirations of all the people of Bengal, both Muslims and Hindus. In

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that sense, Nazrul was an outstanding and unusually gifted literary artist and synthesiser, who successfully captured the different angles and dimensions of our lives and endeavours in his writings, and in so doing he became a writer and poet of unrivalled abilities and achievements.

Unfortunately, Nazrul's literary career did not last long as in July 1942 in the midst of a radio broadcast he suddenly lost his power of speech. Within weeks he had lost his power of thinking and memory. He could not recognise anyone or utter a sound. Thus, rather abruptly, his literary career came to an end. Physically he was however alive for another 35 years; he died in 1977 in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.

Though Nazrul's life as a creative poet, singer, song-writer, essayist and novelist lasted a little over 20 years, his literary output was phenomenal. Apart from three thousand songs, he composed twenty-one books of verses, fourteen of songs, six novels and a collection of stories, in addition to four books of essays, three plays, four collections of poems and plays for children, and three books of translations from the Qur'an and Persian poetry (notably from Hafiz). Many more of his works still remain scattered in different journals and periodicals of the time. Abdul Quadir (1906-1984), the well-known Bangladeshi poet and journalist, subsequently collected most of Nazrul's writings and the Bangla Academy in Dhaka published them in five bulky volumes under the title of Nazrul Rachanabali (Collected Works of Nazrul). In 1976, a few months before his death, Nazrul was awarded a gold medal by the Government of Bangladesh for his services to literature and Bangladeshi citizenship was conferred upon him. He lies buried in the beautiful yard of the historic Dhaka University Mosque. His was the first ever funeral of a poet in full state honour in the history of the sub-continent.

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