

Revolutionary Arts and Political Poetics: Kazi Nazrul Islam
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I am Orpheus's flute, / I bring sleep to the fevered world, / I make the
heaving hells temple in fear and die. / I carry the message of revolt to
the earth and the sky! ... / I am the rebel eternal / I raise my head beyond
this world, / High, ever erect and alone!

-- Kazi Nazrul Islam, "The Rebel" (1922)ⁱ

O, the young rebellious ones / Break down the iron bars of the prison, play the trumpet
of the day of the doom / May the flag of destruction flutter over the wall of 'Prachi' /
Who decides who is ruler, who is the slave? Who decides your punishment? / Break
open the prison cell set fire to the dungeon / Rejoice freedom

-- Kazi Nazrul Islam, "Break Down the Prison Cell"ⁱⁱ

Situated at the intersection of arts, culture, and politics, Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899 – 1976) was revolutionary in every sense of the word. A multifaceted, multidisciplinary artist, Kazi Nazrul Islam's work skillfully traversed a number of genre boundaries. From poetry to drama, from music to philosophy, the National Poet of Bangladesh was a pioneering artist, committed to exploring new forms, seeking out marginal voices, and using arts as a vehicle for anti-colonial action. Known for his life-long dedication to social justice and liberation in the face of orthodoxy and oppression, Kazi Nazrul Islam opposed bigotry in all its form, a belief made clear in the major themes that undergird his artistic work: revolution, respect, freedom, love, and equality. Interested in a humanism that extended well beyond the perimeters of race, class, and gender, Nazrul was a visionary social justice artist. And, his activism is apparent in his reputation as "the rebel poet." Such a sensibility and subjectivity was forged through Nazrul's journalistic and poetic work, which boldly criticized British colonial policies, the British Raj, and sectarianism. Nonetheless, Kazi Nazrul Islam was not bound by traditional nation-state affiliations, a sense evident in his assertion that he and his worked "belong[ed] to the world."

Born in British-occupied India to a Muslim family, Kazi Nazrul Islam came of age at a time of intense violence and struggle. Indeed, the poet's early adulthood was circumscribed by the First World War, wherein he joined the Indian Army in 1917 at the age of eighteen. While stationed in Karachi, Kazi Nazrul Islam as a young man began to write poetry and prose. However, it would not be until the 1920s – when Kazi Nazrul Islam left the army and settled in Calcutta, the cultural capital of India – that the poet's reputation would blossom and flourish. His first novel – *Bandhan-hara* (*Freedom from Bondage*) – was published in 1920. That same year, Nazrul's first collection of poems was also published. His most well-known work – the poem "Bidrohi" ("The Rebel") – was published in *Bijili* (*Thunder*) magazine in 1922. Carrying a theme of rebellion and resistance, "The Rebel" struck a particularly potent chord with a nascent anti-imperial and anti-colonial civil disobedience movement. The poem reinvigorated the Indian liberation movement, and became an anthem for independence in 1947. Twenty-four years later, in 1971, Nazrul's songs and poems would once again be used in the service of independence, and he became a key figure in the movement for Bangladesh liberation. In 1972, Nazrul relocated to Bangladesh. He later received the esteemed title as the "National Poet of Bangladesh."

Over the course of the next two decades, Kazi Nazrul Islam would cement his literary reputation as an innovative resistance artist-activist. Nazrul spent his life confronting political injustice, gender inequality, religious fanaticism, racism, and socioeconomic oppression. Though the poet/composer spent much of his life in dire poverty, he nonetheless celebrated this condition, evident in his verse: “Poverty, you made me a great man / Given me the honor of Christ as he was adorned with the crown of thorns.”ⁱⁱⁱ Armed with an indomitable spirit, Nazrul overcame considerable odds. His artistic career lasted twenty-two years, and in that relatively brief time he composed thousands of songs and poems. This career was cut short at age 43, when the poet/composer/musician was stricken with a neurological disease that caused permanent mental and physical loss.

Compared to poet-activists Walt Whitman, Pablo Neruda, and Maya Angelou, Kazi Nazrul Islam’s legacy on the page – as an innovative, socially conscious, and politically active artist – is in many ways ongoing. Like other social justice poets, Nazrul was very much a humanist, a point made clear in his poem, “Man,” where he evocatively writes, “Of equality I sing, man comes first, / And there is nothing nobler than him. / Differences of cast and creed, / of ages and countries / Matter little.”^{iv} Additionally, Nazrul’s work has been compared to the Romantic poets (Elizabeth Browning, Shelley, and Keats).

Often, the test of an artist is that person’s relevance through time. Certainly, the contemporary global landscape – replete with increased sectarian violence, rigid fundamentalism, human rights violations, and asymmetrical assertions of power – makes pressingly relevant Nazrul’s twentieth-century call for sociopolitical coalitions, unity, and peace in the twenty-first century. Concomitantly, Nazrul’s artistic production – rooted in not only the revelation of human rights abuses but is equally committed to the declaration of human rights possibilities – provides a provocative and evocative foundation upon which to construct new sociopolitical movements.

“Beware my captain”

You have to cross in the darkness of the night
A desert vast and a hill of great height
And a ocean, fathomless and dark
Travelers, beware and look sharp

The boat is trembling,
The water is swelling,
And the boatman is losing his way,
Who will sit at the helm at this hour?
Who has the courage and the power?
The future calls you.
Come forward, all who are bold and true.

(Transl. Kabir Chowdhury. *Poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam*. (Ed. Mohammad Nurul Huda). Dhaka: Bangladesh: Nazrul Institute, 1997. p. 351).

“Wake Up Women”

Wake up women, kindle like the blazing flame;
Breaking through all obstacles
Rise with bright red signs on your forehead

Wake up mothers, daughters, sisters, wives
Bring the dazzle of lightening behind dark cloud
Come as ever victorious, ever vibrant

(Transl. Gulshan Ara. Unpublished)

“Song of Victory”

Sing the song of victory
May the new flag of victory flutter like the free spirited Kalboshekhi [summer storm]

(Transl. Gulshan Ara. Unpublished)

ⁱ Huda, Mohammed Nurul. Poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam in English Translation (Dhaka: Nazrul Institute, 2000). pp. 12-16

ⁱⁱ Translated by Gulshan Ara (unpublished)

ⁱⁱⁱ IBID.

^{iv} Huda, Mohammed Nurul. Poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam in English Translation (Dhaka: Nazrul Institute, 2000). Pp. 259-261.