

# Contribution of Kazi Nazrul Islam to the Bengali Muslim Literature

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## Abstract

*Though literary production in Bengali had been dominated by Hindus in the nineteenth century, primarily as a function of differing colonial methodologies of rule and vernacularization. Muslims too had been producing Bengali poetry and religious literature since the sixteenth century. In the late nineteenth century, Muslims had begun to write recognizably high quality Bengali Language, though many Hindus reviewed such work with scepticism. Muslim Bengalis had generated modern poets of distinction like Kazi Nazrul Islam whose poems and songs, particularly those which he composed against the colonial rule in India, express a youthful exuberance of feeling. This article attempts to examine Kazi Nazrul Islam, so works and highlight his contribution to the Bengali Muslim literature. The emergence of Kazi Nazrul Islam gave Muslim society more confidence in itself. Lexical, mythical and formal traditions of Muslim culture and civilization were again drawn upon and Bengali Muslim literature was enriched.*

## Introduction

Poets of mediocre talent succumb to their influence and become their epigones, unable to find their own way of artistic expression. More gifted and ambitious poets, however, consciously and programmatically try to differentiate themselves from the great predecessors and strive after originally with doubled energy, opening new domains and unbeaten paths to literature. We shall refrain from describing that large number of Bengali writers and poets, who did not enrich their literature by new tones but followed the patterns of *Tagorean* poetry,

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short stories or dramas, even though some of them did write a number of books and found their way to the Bengali readers for the further development of Bengali literature, were those who succeeded in asserting their originality and started new lines of development, either on the thematic level and ideology, or in the matter of literary form. One of the most remarkable personalities to do so was *KaziNazrulIslam* –remarkable in many respects. First of all, he was a Muslim and the first great representative of the numerically prevailing Muslim community to excel in modern Bengali literature. Secondly, as a poor village boy and an orphan, he was not able to acquire any formal education, his knowledge of European literature was rather limited and the originality of his poetry was accounted for, to a large extent, by his self-made man's attitude.<sup>i</sup> This paper is a simple attempt to understand *KaziNazrul Islams'*, work in Bengali literature. The focus in this effort is to explore some contribution of *KaziNazrul Islam* to Muslim literature.

### **Literary Meaning of Literature**

A literary tradition is either thematic, lexical, formal or stylistic in character or the product of the combined operation of these features over a certain period of time. As literature is the creation of Man and as Man is a social being, the evolution, change or maintenance of a literary tradition is intimately tied up with the evolution, change or maintenance of social sensibility. In spite of the fact that Man is eternally Man some aspects of human personality get undue stress in a particular period. A writer must seek eternal truth through his response to its particular manifestation in time and space. He cannot therefore ignore the social sensibility of the period and society to which he belongs. It is through the particular that he must reach the general otherwise his generalizations are likely to be superficial or vague or abstract. The thematic traditions of any literature are therefore integrally related to the socio-cultural traditions of a group of people in any period of their evolution.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Muslim Tradition in Bengali Literature**

#### **Medieval period**

When Muslims first conquered Bengal, there was hardly any Bengali literature worth the name. Nor was the language cultivated by the educated literary expression. During the Hindu period Sanskrit and not Bengali was the accepted court language and the language of culture. Maithili was an influential and effective literary medium. By 1350 A.D. the Muslims had united the different regions of Bengal and started becoming patrons of Bengali language

and literature, thus providing an impetus to new literary productions. By 1350 Bengal had also settlers because of their acceptance of this country as their homeland. Bengali had also become the official medium of expression. Sufis also allowed Bengali songs to be sung in their *majlis-e-sama*, orthodox *Ulema* used to look down upon this language, hence Muslim poets had to justify its use. By 1500 A.D. Muslim poets had ceased to apologies for using Bengali as the medium.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Modern Period**

Muslim writers continued to pursue the medieval tradition even in late nineteenth century. After 1857, however, all, except a handful accepted the new traditions that the Hindu writers had already evolved through their acceptance of Western education and also because of the socio-political status that they had acquired under the British regime. As has already been indicated the very process of education by filtration left the Muslims outside the pale of English education because Muslims by this time had become poor and helpless. Lord Bentinck's policy had abolished the *Qadi* system and withdrawn financial support from native *madrassahs*. Thus a large number of Muslim families were completely ruined. Even before Bentincks' arrival, the new permanent settlement with the accompanying regulation to auction the property if tax was not paid within the stipulated period reduced a large number of unaware and unaccustomed Muslim landlords to total bankruptcy.<sup>iv</sup>

Most of the *Zemindari* passed over to the hands of their Hindu managers who were well-versed in the new technique. Otherwise the Muslims of Bengal would have pushed forward long ago. Moreover, the government policy was not to support the Muslims but to encourage the Hindus. On top of these, we find a large number of missionary schools opened to contagious influences.<sup>v</sup> The impact of western civilization and culture was felt mostly by the Hindus who rose to the occasion and admirably faced the situation. A desire for reform and revival became evident in them, Bengali prose was born, new epical and lyrical forms were created and the novel came to occupy an important place. In the new hierarchy of literature the romances or the *Punthies* were pushed back to the village yard. And in all these three forms-prose, poetry and fiction, the demand of the newly educated Hindu society was considerably satisfied. The Muslim society was not taken into consideration by the Hindu writers. It was not possible for them to do so, neither was it desirable from their revivalist point of view. On the other hand we notice a positive revulsion against Muslim rule in a writer like *Bankim Chatterjee*.<sup>vi</sup>

When Muslim writers therefore began to write in prose, they discovered that already there had developed a prose-style which was very different from the style of the colloquial prose used in their daily conversation. A growing tradition of novel-writing has been imported from the West and a new kind of poetry had emerged which had left the tradition of the *punthis* behind. The earlier Muslim traditions of forms, vocabulary and imagery were considered outdated, outmoded, and unpalatable. They found that *punthi*-writing was practiced only in the villages; the educated society of Kolkata considered Byron, Shelley, Keats, Milton and Shakespeare as their ideals and models. They had therefore to adjust themselves to this tradition and then bring whatever new elements they could.<sup>vii</sup> This attitude – the glorification of the past, the lamentation for the present and the exhortation for the future – became a traditional attitude of Muslim poets up to Kazi Nazrul Islam.<sup>viii</sup> He made it very clear in one of his poems:

*I don't care whether I shall be*

*Remember after the enthusiasm of this age has exhausted itself  
It's enough that the sun is  
Shining over my head and hundreds of golden lads and girls  
Are moving about me.*

What he wants is 'freedom' and 'reform'. From the very outset till independence, therefore, in almost all the forms, Muslim writers had tried to be realistic in spite of their idealism.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Rebel Poet**

In Bengali literature, the influence of Rabindranath Tagore was overwhelming and it was difficult for most Bengali literary figures to break loose from the patterns set by him, but one Muslim writer Kazi Nazrul Islam did just that by producing works of an original nature. After serving in the army during the First World War, he began his literary career in the early 1920s, producing a number of novels, poems and short themes. Although he did not take an active part in the nationalist movement, he had an instinctive feel for the contemporary struggle for freedom that was being waged. Some of his writing was indeed revolutionary, his readers enthused by his spirit of revolt and patriotic zeal, called him a *bidrohi* (rebel) which was also the title of one of his poems.<sup>x</sup>

*Bolo bir  
Balo Unnato Mamasir*<sup>xi</sup>

[ *Declare, oh brave one, declare, "My head is held high*]

Kazi Nazrul Islam was a popular writer of songs, a revolutionary. The first Indian poet to be jailed by the British for writing a poem demanding complete independence. He was born on 25 May, 1899, at Churulia (in Burdwan district, West Bengal), the fifth child of Fakir Ahmed, the Imam of a Mosque. All his older brothers had died in infancy. For some reason Nazrul Islam nicknamed as a child was "*DukhooMian*". The family adopted the honorific "*Kazi*" from an ancestor who had been appointed judge by a Mughal king.<sup>xii</sup>

Kazi Nazrul Islam had taken up a job at the age of eight when his father died. He joined a band of folk performers, and toured with them, composing poems and songs, he was a bright student. But he could not complete his school education. However, one of his teachers, who was associated with the *Jugantar* group, instilled in him a strong patriotic sentiment which he carried all his life. In 1917, Nazrul Islam became a professional soldier and joined the forty-ninth Bengal Regiment. When he was posted in Karachi, he read the works of the great Persian poets Hafiz and Omar Khayyam from a *Maulavi* (Islamic Scholar) and published his first poem '*Mukti*' (freedom) in the journal *Bangiya Musalman Shitya Patrika*. After the end of World War I, Nazrul Islam returned to Kolkata and became a co-editor of the daily *Nabayug*, along with the communist leader *Muzaffar Ahmed*. He began to regularly contribute poems, stories and novels to *Navayug*, *Prabasi* and *Moslem Bharat*. *Nazrul Islam* became extremely popular especially with the youth after the publication of his long poem *Bidrohi* (rebel) in the weekly literary magazine *Bijali* in 1922. Soon after, he began to publish and edit a fortnightly magazine called *Dhumketu*, in which he raised the demand for India's independence from British rule. The magazine was proscribed and he was sentenced to a year's imprisonment by the British government. Since he was not allowed the status of political prisoner, he went on a hunger strike that lasted for 39 days. Rabindranath Tagore sent him a telegram requesting him to give up his fast because, Tagore wrote, Nazrul Islam had a lot to contribute to Bengali literature.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Contribution to Bengali Literature**

Kazi Nazrul Islam departed from the literary conventions of his time and created his own poetical language. He frequently used Arabic or Persian words. He wrote and set to music about 3000 songs. Initially, Nazrul Islam's songs were mostly *ghazals* ( a genre of

north Indian light classical poetry), but later he borrowed elements from Bengali folk and devotional tunes, Middle Eastern music, *thumri*/another genre of north Indian classical music and various other sources. As in his poems, *Nazrul Islam* established a style distinctly different from that of Tagore in his musical compositions. Among his books of lyrics, the collection of Muslim devotional songs called *zulfikar*, the collection of patriotic songs called *sarbahara* deserve special mention. Many critics consider that his greatest contribution to Bengali literature is his songs. He was also associated with theatre and wrote scripts for films.<sup>xiv</sup>

*Kazi Nazrul Islam* had an exuberance that allowed him to produce a very large corpus of works within a rather short literary career. In 1942, he lost his speech and memory, which he never regained. In 1972, *Sheikh Mujibur Rahman*, then Prime Minister of Bangladesh, took him to Dhaka as a state guest, where he breathed his last. He was awarded the *Jagattarini Gold Medal* by Calcutta University, the *Padma Bhushan* by the Government of India, the *Ekushe Padak* by the Government of Bangladesh. Some of his major collections of poems are *Agnibina*, *Dolonchapa*, *Bisher Bani*, *Chhayanat*, *Samyabadi*, *SindhiHillol*, *Shesh Saugat*, and *Sanchita*, collections of essays are *Yugabani*, *Dhumketi* and a collection of short stories *Byathou Dan*. He also wrote two novels called *Bandhanhara* and *Kuhelika*.<sup>xv</sup>

### **Nazrul Islam Contribution to Islamic Poetry and Songs**

Among all the song-writers of Bangla language who wrote Islamic songs *Kazi Nazrul Islam's* name comes in the very first place. Genuine Islamic songs were not composed before *Nazrul Islam's* endeavour. *Nazrul Islam's* alone composition of all these Islamic songs awakened a new consciousness of nationality and advancement in the minds of the Bengali Muslims. Before independence from the British rule in Indian sub-continent the Muslims became a parasitic losing their traditional glory. He reminded them of their lost sense of Muslim nationalism and sense of equity proclaimed by Islam. Moreover, he tried his best to build a bond between the Hindu and Muslim communities. At the same time he wanted to revive the Bengali-speaking Muslims by inspiring them through his Islamic *nasheeds* and poetry. His contribution for that purpose was huge.<sup>xvi</sup> *Abul Mansur* says:

*“It is certainly true that if poet Nazrul Islam were not born at least the Bengali-speaking Muslim society would have been compelled to fall back from today's advancement of their success probably for about one century. One day Nazrul Islam came like a storm and*

*conquered the fort of Bengali literature making a loud call, Allahu Akbar (Allah is great). He waved the flag on the broken castle of Bengali-Muslim society. He fulfilled the want of language and substance of the Muslim Bangla literature. From the spiritual perspective it is a revolution in their national life. The leader of this revolution is none other than Nazrul.*<sup>xvii</sup>

Throughout his life he continued to nurture the Islamic thoughts and sentiments he was acquainted with from his childhood. *Love of Allah and Rasulallah* found shelter in the innermost part of his heart. Consequently, through his poetry and songs he makes us hear the words of *Allah Subhanahuwata'ala* and His Prophet Muhammad. He sings his Islamic songs of humanity with the light of the Holy Quran and Hadith. It was he who first used Arabic and Persian terms in many of his poetry as well as songs with a marvellous craft which successfully exposed the Bengali-Muslim culture. Before Nazrul Islam other poets tried to use Arabic and Persian language in their literary work to create a new form. But their attempt did not succeed as the terminology did not suit the substance and mood of their literature<sup>xviii</sup>. Nazrul Islam's introduction to the Iranian poet *Hafiz Sheerazi*, his study and translation of *Sheerazi* influenced Nazrul Islam's poetry to a great extent. The rhythm, wording, mood and subject matter of *Sheerazi's* poetry and *gazals* have made Nazrul Islam's poetry noble and ornamented them with a sense of love, spirituality and many other beauties. He was influenced by other Persian poets *Omar Khayyam* and *Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi*. This expertise in various languages did not come on to him suddenly. Nazrul Islam took his first lesson of Arabic and Persian languages from his *maktabs* (maktab is a primary school that teaches Islamic education) teacher *Moulovi Kazi Fazle Ahammad*. Besides, Nazrul had an uncle named Bazle Karim who was an expert in Persian. He tried to write poetry in Persian language. By the influence of this uncle Nazrul Islam tried to write poetry mingling Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Bangla.<sup>xix</sup>

*Kabya Ampara* was one of the greatest Islamic works of Nazrul Islam. Along with other scholars in this book Nazrul Islam translated thirty eight chapters of the Qur'an in the form of poetry. Nazrul Islam says in the introduction of *Kabya Ampara* that his greatest intention in life was to translate the whole Qur'an in the form of poetry. However, though he could not execute his great wish completely, but Allah has fulfilled part of his desire. The Bangla-speaking Muslims as well as non-Muslim communities are indebted to Nazrul Islam for his contribution to Islam. It was Nazrul Islam's wish to be buried near a mosque as he expressed this desire in one of his songs – *Mosjideripasheamarkabardiobhai* (Bury me by the

mosque). Accordingly his wish was fulfilled, he was buried near the mosque adjacent to the University of Dhaka.<sup>xx</sup>

From the beginning to the end of his literary life Nazrul Islam wrote a number of Islamic originated poetry and songs.<sup>xxi</sup> The following is a list of his Islamic works:

1. *In Moslem Bharat Kazi Nazrul Islam's first published poem was 'Shat-il-Arab' (May 1920)*
2. *Second poem 'Kheya Parer Toroni' (July 1920)*
3. *'Korbani' (August 1920)*
4. *'Mohorrom' (September 1920)*
5. *Seven Islamic poems along with five other poems published in Agni-bina (October 1922)*
6. *Poems in Arabic Rhymes (1923)*
7. *'Fatiha-e-doa-j-dohom' published in Bisher Bashi (1924)*
8. *'Khaled' (1926)*
9. *'Umar Faruq' published in Sawgat (1927)*
10. *Jinjir (1928)*
11. *Rubaiyat-e-Hafij (1930)*
12. *Julfikar (1932)*
13. *Kabya Ampara (1933)*
14. *Mohammad Mostafa Salle Ala and Jabi Ke Madinay (1933)*
15. *Tawfeek Dao Khoda Islame (1934)*
16. *Maktab Sahitya (1935)*
17. *Sei Rabiul Awer Chand (1937)*
18. *Ore O Madina Bolte Parish (1938)*
19. *Nine Gazals of Diwan-e-Hafij translated and published in Nirjhor (1939)*
20. *Notun Chand (1939)*
21. *Khodar Raham Chaho Jodi Nabijire Dhorro (1940)*

22. *Morubhaskar(1950)*

23. *Rubaiyat-e-Omar Khayyam (1958)*

The themes of Nazrul Islam's Islamic songs are of various religious matters. Islam is based on five pillars. All these Islamic aspects are wonderfully presented in Nazrul Islam's Islamic songs I have translated. For example, in the song "The Word of *Shahada* contains the light of Allah" the poet reveals the reward that is hidden in *shahada* and describes the importance of the remembrance of Allah.<sup>xxii</sup>

Allah is my Lord, I fear no one

[Original in Bangla: Allah Amar Prabhu]

Translation: Kabir Chowdhury

*Allah is my Lord, I fear no one,*

*Muhammad is our Prophet.*

*Throughout the world his praise is sung.*

*I have my Quran,*

*Why should I fear my one?*

*Islam is my religion,*

*The Kalima is my amulet,*

*The Twahid my guide,*

*Iman is my shield and the crescent my reading fight*

*Allal-u-Akbar is my battle cry,*

*And my final destination is paradise.*

*Where the Arsh of Allah lies.*

*The Muslims of the world, in China or in India,*

*in Egypt or in Arabia,*

*are my brothers dear,*

*Here all are equal,*

*There is no class distinction here,*

*Here we wake up and arise  
at the sound of the same takbir  
Here we are one body one heart one soul.  
Here prince and the pauper play same noble role.*

*In this world of Islam  
I know that the ultimate victory will be mine,  
I know that through Islam alone.  
Can I achieve my final goal.*

*-KaziNazrul Islam*

Nazrul Islam was a humanity-oriented voice of conscience. He awakened the Muslims as to how they have lost the spirit represented by the Qur'an and the Prophetic legacy. In a poem about Eid, he beautifully portrayed the relevance of Eid for the poor and deprived. Nazrul Islam was universalistic, deeply humanity-oriented and full of love and compassion for the people, especially the oppressed, deprived and downtrodden. In a poem (as well as song lyric) on the theme of Ramadan and Eid,<sup>xxiii</sup> he wrote:

At the end of the Ramadan Fast, O My Mind!  
(Original: O Mon, Ramzaneroirozarsheshe)

Translation: Mizanur Rahman

*At the end of the Ramadan Fast, O My mind!  
The End of pleasure has arrived!  
Give thyself away this day  
And harken to the heavenly command!*

*All your wealth and gold,  
All your palaces are for God alone!  
Pay off the poor-rates this day  
To rouse the lifeless Muslims any way!*

*Thou art to say the prayer  
On that field of Eid,  
Where the Muslim variants gave their lives  
And became Shaheed!*

*Forget who friends are and who foes are this day.  
And grasp the hands of all.  
By dint of Love make the entire world  
Respond to Islam's call!*

*Those who have fasted all their life  
Without break and pause,  
Give to those poor ones this day  
Whatever will serve their cause!  
Pour out unto the goblet of your mind  
The Shirnee of Tauheed!  
The Prophet will be pleased, it seems,  
To accept your gift!  
-Kazi Nazrul Islam*

Nazrul Islam died on 29 August 1976, but in reality he had remained completely silent and inactive for 34 years since his illness in 1942.<sup>xxiv</sup> And he says:

*Those who have read my poetry are the witnesses that I have tried my whole life to unite the Muslims, to remove their inactivity, idleness, spiritual emptiness and disbelief. By the strength Allah has given me, all I have persevered with whatever I said, whatever I wrote and with my own life to make the Muslims of Bengal stand raising their head, as a Muslim bows his head before none but Allah. Truly my endeavour was to keep the belief of the three crore ignorant Muslims intact, by recording hundreds of Islamic songs in the gramophone recorder”*

He is a national poet of Bangladesh and loved by both Indian and Bangladeshi people.<sup>xxv</sup> Even though every Bengali (and Bengali includes Muslims as well as others) knows about

*Nazrul Islam*, he is hardly known outside, because very little of his works has been translated into other languages. Hopefully that will change over time.

## References

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<sup>iv</sup>*Ibid*, p.58

<sup>v</sup>*Ibid*, pp.58-59

<sup>vi</sup>*Ibid*, pp.59-60

<sup>vii</sup>*Ibid*, p.60

<sup>viii</sup>*Ibid*, p.61

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<sup>x</sup>Burjor Avari, *Islamic Civilization in South Asia*, U.S.A: Routledge, 2013, pp.222-23

<sup>xi</sup>Kazi Nazrul Islam, *Poem bidrohi (rebel)*

<sup>xii</sup>Khushawant Singh, *Why I supported the Emergency: Essays and Profiles*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd. 2009, p.114

<sup>xiii</sup>Kunal Chakrabarti and Shabhra Chakrabarti, *Historical Dictionary of the Bengalis*, U.K: Scare Crow Press, Inc., 2013, p.235

<sup>xiv</sup>*Ibid*, p.236

<sup>xv</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>xvi</sup>Aireen Akter Ruhee, *Translation of Selected Islamic Songs Written by Kazi Nazrul Islam*, (Unpublished Dissertation), 2013, pp.15-16

<sup>xvii</sup>*Ibid*, p.16

<sup>xviii</sup>*Ibid*, p.17

<sup>xix</sup>*Ibid*, p.18

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<sup>xx</sup>Ibid,p.20

<sup>xxi</sup>Ibid

<sup>xxii</sup>Ibid,p.21-22

<sup>xxiii</sup>Retrieved from [globalwebpost.com/farooqm/writings/islamic/nazrul\\_eid\\_poetry.html](http://globalwebpost.com/farooqm/writings/islamic/nazrul_eid_poetry.html) (Accessed on 22/1/2015)

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<sup>xxv</sup>Retrieved from [www.academia.edu/.../Kazi\\_Nazrul\\_Islam\\_A\\_Rebellious\\_Bengali\\_Poe](http://www.academia.edu/.../Kazi_Nazrul_Islam_A_Rebellious_Bengali_Poe)(Accessed on 22/1/2015)

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