

KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM : THE POETICS OF REBELLION AND HUMANISM IN THE ETHICS OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY

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Abstract:

Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976), known as the Rebel Poet of Bengal, is among the most dynamic voices of the South Asian literary tradition. This research paper explores the convergence of rebellion, humanism, and religious pluralism in his thought and works. By situating Nazrul within both colonial Bengal’s political ferment and global currents of ethical modernity, the study reinterprets his poetry, prose, and music as acts of literary insurgency against dogma and oppression. Through his symbolic integration of Islamic, Hindu, and universalist imagery, Nazrul emerges as a prophet of interreligious solidarity and decolonial humanism whose ideals remain acutely relevant in an increasingly polarized world.

Keywords: Kazi Nazrul Islam, secular humanism, religious harmony, rebellion, cultural syncretism, decolonial thought, gender equality.

Introduction:

Kazi Nazrul Islam’s life and works epitomize the union of artistic genius and moral rebellion. Emerging from the socio-political turbulence of colonial India, he embodied both the defiant voice of liberation and the compassionate heart of universal love. His poetry—resonant with thunder and tenderness—defies boundaries of nation, creed, and class. While Rabindranath Tagore emphasized harmony through introspective idealism, Nazrul’s art combined dynamism with defiance, proclaiming equality beyond ritual and religion.

He called for human dignity, spiritual freedom, and the end of all forms of bondage—social, political, and intellectual. His declaration, “There is nothing greater than man,” situates him within the lineage of global humanist thinkers like Walt Whitman and Shelley.

Nazrul’s Life and Intellectual Formation:

Born in Churulia, a small village in Bengal, Nazrul’s early life was marked by hardship, curiosity, and exposure to diversity. From mosque and mazaar to temple and kirtan, he encountered multifarious spiritual traditions that shaped his composite worldview. His formative years as a ‘leto’ performer, soldier in the British Indian Army, and self-taught scholar allowed him to experience both oppression and transcendence.

His literary journey began amidst wartime turmoil, culminating in works like ‘Bidrohi (The Rebel)’ and ‘Bangar Gaan’—poetic testaments to his revolutionary humanism. In prison, his verse became an invocation of justice; his rebellion transformed from the political into the metaphysical.

The Poetics of Rebellion and the Liberation of the Soul:

Nazrul’s ‘Bidrohi’ revolutionized Bengali poetry through metaphorical audacity. In one exalted moment, the poet unites ‘Shiva’s damaru’ with ‘Israfil’s trumpet’, symbolizing the cosmic unity of East and West, Heaven and Earth. This synthesis of opposites represents a metaphysical humanism where rebellion becomes a path to liberation.

His protest was not mere political activism—it was a spiritual defiance against hierarchy, fanaticism, and injustice. Nazrul envisioned a new moral geography where self-respect is both an individual right and a collective responsibility. His aesthetic of equality transforms literature into an ethical weapon—a vision shared by revolutionary humanists across cultures.

Religious Syncretism and Humanistic Ethics:

Nazrul’s theology resists exclusivism. Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit idioms coexist in his verse, forming a ‘poetics of synthesis’. He invoked both “Allah” and “Kali” in the same breath, not as contradiction but as affirmation of the One Spirit underlying all forms. His songs, from ‘Islamic Hamd’ to ‘Shyama Sangeet’, articulate a civilizational dialogue that transcends dogma.

He wrote, “A poet belongs to humanity, not to any religion.” In this claim lies Nazrul’s greatest philosophical triumph—the transformation of poetry into an ethical ground where faith becomes love and worship becomes equality. His philosophy parallels Rumi’s mysticism, Tagore’s universalism, and modern interfaith ethics.

Critique of Sectarianism and Power:

Nazrul’s essays—‘Hindu-Musalman’, ‘Mandir o Masjid’, and ‘Manush’—are fierce indictments of religious hypocrisy and politicized dogma. He exposed how priests and mullahs weaponized faith to maintain social control. His famous assertion, “The scholars and mullahs fight, not Hindus and Muslims,” unmasks the roots of communalism as elite manipulation.

This critique anticipates modern sociological readings of religion as both ideology and apparatus of dominance. Yet, unlike Karl Marx’s emphasis on materialism, Nazrul proposes a redemptive spirituality anchored in compassion and justice. For him, love alone can redeem civilization from the corruption of power.

Gender, Love, and the Sacred Feminine:

Nazrul's egalitarianism extends to gender and love. In his poem 'Nari', he declares, "Half of what is great in the world women have created." This is not mere rhetoric—it represents one of the earliest proto-feminist articulations in Bengali literature. His portrayal of love blends Sufi 'Ishq' with Vaishnava 'Bhakti', expressing divinity through reciprocity, not submission.

For Nazrul, love was an existential rebellion—a refusal to accept injustice. His poetic narrative sanctifies womanhood as divine energy, echoing both Durga's creative power and Islamic reverence for 'Rahmah (compassion)'.

Literature as the Voice of Liberation:

Nazrul's literary vision unified the social and the spiritual. He declared, "I am the poet of that day when all tears will be wiped from human eyes." To him, art was vocation, not ornament—a means to awaken conscience.

Through poetry, prose, and song, he confronted class inequality, colonial repression, and communal division. His humanism was insurgent; his rebellion compassionate. Nazrul's literature thus becomes an ethical manifesto for liberation—a merging of art and activism.

Comparative Analysis with Global Thought:

Nazrul's philosophy resonates with transnational discourses in ethics and humanism. Like Whitman, he celebrated unity in diversity; like Nietzsche, he redefined rebellion as self-overcoming; and like Rumi, he found God in love itself. His poetry aligns with global modernism's aesthetics of freedom and decolonial identity.

By integrating multicultural linguistics, his art contests colonial binaries—East versus West, faith versus reason—and affirms hybridity as the essence of modern identity.

Contemporary Relevance:

In the twenty-first century—an era of renewed fundamentalism—Nazrul's message of universal tolerance carries revolutionary importance. His proclamation that "Religion is for humanity, not humanity for religion" echoes in present struggles against extremism. In South Asia's plural societies, his inclusive ethos offers a democratic framework rooted in empathy and justice.

Nazrul's voice thus anticipates modern secularism not as rejection of religion but as affirmation of coexistence.

Conclusion:

Kazi Nazrul Islam's legacy transcends poetry to stand as an ethical vision for humanity. He synthesized religious syncretism, artistic rebellion, and moral egalitarianism into a coherent

philosophy of liberation. His art broke barriers of creed, gender, and power, offering love as both aesthetic and law.

As he wrote, “Break the cages of creed; let man soar as the bird of love.” His call remains imperative today—when division still threatens civilization, Nazrul reminds us that true freedom is the song of unity and compassion.

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