

**Niaz Zaman and M.A. Quayum, trans. *The Revolutionary* (Kazi Nazrul Islam's *Kubelika*). Dhaka: Nympha Publications, 2016. 176 pp. ISBN: 978-984-92297-1-1.**

This translation of Kazi Nazrul Islam's novel, *Kubelika* (literally, mist and metaphorically, a mystery, an enigma) into English as *The Revolutionary*, by Niaz Zaman and M.A. Quayum is an important step towards the "worlding" of Nazrul's texts and especially his prose works. This latest translation acknowledges its intellectual debt to Kabir Chaudhury's the first ever English translation (Dhaka: Nazrul Institute, 1994) and to Chaudhury's erudite "Introduction." Every new translation is a radical recasting; a rewriting and a texturing of the "original." While Chaudhury's translation retains its importance as the first endeavour to globalise Nazrul's narratives, Zaman and Quayum's text is significant because:

1. It embraces more contemporary translational praxis.
2. It foregrounds the figures of the women revolutionaries in the narrative—something that was occluded in Chaudhury's "Introduction" to his *Kubelika*.
3. It directs the readers' attention to the complexity in so far as Nazrul's portrayal of women characters is concerned. Women, here, are not stereotyped as arousing sexual desire; skilled in the art of seduction or alternatively, asexual, motherly, imbued with care giving, home making skills. Instead they are imagined as complex human figures and central to public service as well as the nation-building process.
4. Zaman and Quayum also direct attention to the hitherto unexplored layers of violence in the text and the act of rape visited upon Tehamina (nicknamed, Bhuni) by Jahangir. While I beg to disagree, and "read" this episode as "consensual consummation of desire" and not "rape," I am indebted to the translators for directing my attention towards the episode. I and the readers are indebted to the translators for pointing towards the centrality of this episode in so far as their engagement with Jahangir's violence-prone, eccentric nature is concerned. That such quirks lurk just beneath his quiet idealistic surface is the key to our understanding of the narrative. It also illumines the narrative's problematic engagement with the idea and ideal of the woman and romantic love in times of a "mal" and "public space oriented" nationalist movement.
5. The "Introduction" to this translation is important in so far as it situates the fictive women revolutionaries of *Kubelika*, Joyoti and her daughter Champa, within the historicity of Bengali women revolutionaries such as

- Pritilata Waddedar, Santi Ghosh and Suniti Choudhury and their taking up of arms against British imperialism.
6. The “Introduction” is important in so far as it situates three of Nazrul’s novels (*Kubelika*, *Bandhon Hara* and *Mrityukshudha*) within the larger context of political novel-writing in *Bangla*. Tagorean engagements with the problematic of secular, inclusive anti-colonial resistance in narratives such as *Ghare Baire*, *Char Adhbay*, *Chaturanga* is important in this context. While *Gora* is not mentioned by the translators, I believe, situating the figure of Gora (in Tagore’s eponymous narrative) alongside Jahangir and examining their being burdened with problematic or no-identity positions, would open up vistas for more meaningful debates.
  7. Finally the “Introduction” to the translation points to the fact that the revolutionary is a Muslim and that one of the central concerns of the novel is the issue of Muslims being either excluded by Hindu revolutionaries, or excluding themselves from the larger anti-imperialist *swadeshi* (nationalist) movement because of their imagined affiliations with Saudi Arabia as “homeland.” That in Nazrul’s novel, Jahangir is a Muslim and a revolutionary is significant when the colonised Indians are still questioning the communal identity of their neighbours. That such divisive identity quests will only help the crafty English; that Indians will sink or swim together; that the people of colonised India are one; that they have been nurtured by the same air, water and earth, has been the abiding theme and contribution of Nazrul’s writings.
  8. This is why, as Zaman and Quyum point out, Nazrul’s novels must be read as co-texts of his poems and as complementary to contemporary writings (especially Tagore’s). That Nazrul foregrounds questions of inclusive and secular nationalism is of the greatest importance.

Now a few words about the translation itself would be in order. While Nazrul’s poems are widely known and competent English-language translations have augmented their global reception, his prose narratives (especially his three novels) have enjoyed relatively less readerly-attention, even in their original language of production, that is, *Bangla*. This effort to make a relatively less-known work of one of the great creative writers’ of undivided Bengal, is in itself commendable.

This book comes from Bangladesh (translated and published), a nation produced on the anvil of linguistic and cultural specificities, and one that claims Nazrul as its own just as the Bengalis in West Bengal in India, and Bengalis all over the world, do. In that sense this translation is a homage to one of the greatest of Bengali writers; a timely celebration of one who has enriched Bengali culture through his prodigious, and generically variegated *oeuvre* – his balladic verse, lyrical poems, songs, novels and prose writings.

Nazrul's particular contribution to *Bangla* literature is the frank assertion and enrichment of its Perso-Arabic cultural traditions. This is a tradition that had been somewhat occluded (and demeaned) post the Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, and the Fort William sahibs' recasting of the *Bangla* language and literature at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For the *Bangla bhasa* and its literature thereof, this practically amounted to an upper-caste, upper-class Hindu-Anglicist cultural hijacking of *Bangla sabitya*.

Nazrul's writing is significant because it dignifies an equally important cultural strand of *Bangla sabitya*, but refuses to fall into the trap of asserting an exclusive, rigid and divisive communal identity thereby. The cultural authenticity and dignity along with a cosmopolitan inclusivity, that is the hallmark of Nazrul's writings-at the moment when the imaginary of an inclusive, secular nation was under every kind of threat--appears like an impossible-to-achieve cultural ideal even today.

His novel *Kubelika* could very well be read as a co-text of his poem "*Kandari Hunshiar*" ("Boatman Beware"). A poem read and recited by almost every school going Bengali, resonates with the lines "*Hindu na ora Muslim/Oi jiggashe konjon*"? (Who inquires whether or not one is a Hindu or a Muslim?). This question is being asked by the incredulous narrator of the poem because this is when the boat is in turbulent waters and in peril of sinking with its passengers. Needless to say that the "boat" is the colonised Indian subcontinent (or *Bharat* as Nazrul calls it), and the "boat people" squabbling about their communal identity are those enslaved *Bharatiyas* that fall into the very trap created by their imperialist masters to keep them in perpetual chains.

As Uljhulul or Jahangir, the protagonist of *Kubelika* asserts, *Bharat* is held in chains by the British because its people would rather define themselves communally rather than as people of one motherland, because they would rather call themselves Hindu or Muslim without realising their embeddedness within richly intersecting identity positions

The recasting of the *Bangla* title *Kubelika* (mist, mystery) as *The Revolutionary* (with *Kubelika* inscribed below in fine print) in the Zaman and Quayum's English translation deserves critical attention. The title *The Revolutionary* is apt because it dovetails easily with Nazrul's image as the eternal rebel, the iconoclast and reminds the reader of the title, tone and tenor of Nazrul's most well-known poem, "*Bidrohi*." There is however a flip side to such a translational decision.

Obviously such a translation caters to readers who cannot read *Bangla* or any Indic language except English. The Sanskritic resonance of the title and its particular significance, as worked out in Nazrul's novel, in relation to the woman; the woman one loves; the love of the motherland; and the enigmatic figure of the revolutionary who spurns all such love to give up his very life; would be fairly obvious to the subcontinental, Anglophone but bilingual reader of Nazrul's novel, *Kubelika*. I am of the opinion that the retaining of the original *Bangla* title

in the English translation (as the first and only title) would have been an act of cultural integrity. The translators would have thereby dragged the complacent Anglophone readers out of their comfort zones; forced them to look up the meaning of *kubelika*. The Anglophone readers in turn, would have been rewarded for their effort by becoming culturally enabled to appreciate the rich texturing that the word “*kubelika*” has lent to the original *Bangla* narrative. The prising out of the enigmatic figure of the revolutionary and foregrounding of it as *the title* in order to make the novel accessible to the non-subcontinental, Anglophone readers, reduces the complexity of Nazrul’s work.

The translation lacks consistency in the sense that certain *Bangla* words are footnoted initially, but later *Bangla* words are left unglossed and their English equivalent placed side by side for better understanding. I feel that the second method should have been followed more consistently taking into consideration the realities of a globalised world and the global familiarity of many Sanskritic and Perso-Arabic words. Words like *be-tamiz* could very well have been left unglossed for the Anglophone reader to sweat somewhat and arrive at their meaning.

The novel begins with a set of boisterous young men located in a boarding house, a mess-*bari*. A rented accommodation whose utilities (and costs) are often shared by several (usually college or office-going) young men in the city of Kolkata, as commuting from their *desherbari* (village homes) is practically impossible is significant as the locus of Nazrul’s novel. The mess *bari* as a public and male space of polemical exchange; a symbol of dissociation and yearning for *desherbari*; a space of male camaraderie have been the abiding trope of many a Bengali novel. The names of Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay, Saradindu Bandopadhyay, Shibram Chakravarty, Premendra Mitra, would be few among many that immediately spring to our minds. These and other lesser known Bengali novelists have deployed the city boarding house as an abiding trope in their narratives.

There is a comfort feeling, a sense of familiarity, as this novel opens with a group of young men in a mess *bari*, cracking jokes; thrusting comic, insulting nicknames upon each other (Kumbhir Miah, Uljhulul etc); discussing women, or love, as the case may be. Their pouncing on food like famine-struck hordes; pining for their homes and engaging in fiery polemics, also makes us (that is, readers of the *Bangla* novel) feel that we “have been there and done that.”

Readers however, sense a hint of coming doom and the narrational twists and turns serve to bring the action to its inevitable tragic end.

Nazrul’s novel questions many stereotypes, the most important perhaps being the stereotype of the “goddess like pure mother.” Such a questioning is remarkable at a time when *Vande Mataram* (hail motherland) was the cry of every revolutionary and the country was normatively imagined as the motherland. The entreaty to the “sons” to free the pure and suffering “mother” from the chains of the *mleccha* (foreign, heathen, impure) violators in Bankimchandra

Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath* is a powerful one and one that practically shaped the nationalist movement.

While Rabindranath Tagore subverts this ideal of motherhood in one kind of a way in the figure of Anandamayee in *Gora*, Nazrul does so in another way in his delineation of the figure of the firm, compassionate and honest but "illegitimate" mother of Jahangir. *Khan-e-Dajjal*, *Rai Baghini*, or the other names by which the mistress of Khan Bahadur Faruk (Jahangir's legitimate father) is called, is after his father's passing away, the controlling authority/owner of Khan Bahadur's Comilla estate. That Nazrul dares to subvert the mother and son figure (the courtesan and her illegitimate son) and make them perform a veritable *agnipariksha* (trial by fire) takes the novel *Kuhelika* to another level, in so far as narrating the nation in the Bangla *bhasa* goes.

The final episode where Jahangir and Champa are captured (even though Champa escapes) and Jahangir transported to the Andamans for having carried arms and plotted against the British Raj is a celebratory and symbolic moment even in its tragic dimensions. There is a Muslim man, a Hindu woman and both have crossed barriers and prejudices of *jaat* (community) *dharm*a (religion) and *linga* (gender) in sacrificing their lives for the nation. The *babir* of the man and the *andar* of the woman; the emasculation of the Muslim and the virility of the Hindu; the inevitability of romantic sexual union between young men and women are essentialist stereotypes that are smashed in this momentous closure of the novel. The hint of a truly emancipated India is imagined in the breaking down of every mind-forged manacle.

I recommend a return to Kazi Nazrul and the cosmopolitan values he enshrines; a return to reading his novels; and a reading of this new translation of *Kuhelika*.

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