

I am Keats: Kazi Nazrul Islam and the Romantic Poet

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Abstract

In a letter to Qazi Motahar Hossain, Kazi Nazrul Islam described how close he felt to Keats. He even feared that his sore throat was a sign of tuberculosis and he would succumb to it as Keats did. He was also in love, like Keats, with a woman who did not reciprocate his love. However, it was not only in his personal letters that Nazrul talked about Keats, but also in his essays. It is possible that the inspiration for “Amar Sundar” (My Beauty) came from Keats’ oft-quoted line. This paper will examine selected letters and essays by Nazrul to show how he appropriated the youngest English Romantic in his writings.

Keywords: Qazi Motahar Hossain, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Keats, letters, essays, “Amar Sundar”

Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) had a disturbed schooling. He was in and out of school, went to different schools at different times, and, in 1917, when he was supposed to sit for his matriculation examination, he dropped out to join the newly recruited 49th Bengal. Surprisingly, for a restless young man who had not had regular schooling, he was widely read in the English Romantics. In a letter to Qazi Motahar Hossain, Kazi Nazrul Islam describes how akin he feels to Keats. He fears his sore throat is a sign of tuberculosis and he will succumb to it like Keats did. He is also hopelessly in love, like Keats, with a woman who does not reciprocate his love. However, it was not only in his personal letters that he talked about Keats, but also in his essays. Nazrul had closely read Keats’ poetry – at least “Endymion,” “To a Grecian Urn,” and “Ode to a Nightingale.” In his essay, “Bartaman Bishwa Sahitya” (World Literature Today), he drew upon Shelley, Keats, and Whitman as poles to talk about contemporary European literature. It is also possible that the inspiration for “Amar Sundar” (My Beauty) came from Keats’ oft-quoted line. Though he has been compared to Byron, selected writings of Nazrul will show how he empathized with and appropriated the youngest English Romantic.

The Nazrul Institute compilation of Nazrul’s letters includes eight written to Qazi Motahar Hossain,¹ who was at that time teaching in the Department of Mathematics at the University of Dhaka (then spelled Dacca). It is possible that Qazi Motahar Hossain got to know Nazrul through his involvement with Muslim Sahitya Samaj, a group of Bengali-Muslim intellectuals, who believed in tolerance and communal



harmony and initiated a movement called *Buddhir Mukti Andolon* (Freedom of Thought Movement). In February 1927 and February 1928, Nazrul attended the first and second annual conference of the Dhaka Muslim Sahitya Samaj. Sometime during his visit to Dhaka, Nazrul met Fazilatunessa² – along with other bright students such as Buddhadev Bose and Ranu Shome, who later married Buddhadev Bose. Fazilatunessa was studying mathematics, something which puzzled Nazrul. Infatuated by this vivacious and brilliant young woman, Nazrul wrote several letters about her to Qazi Motahar Hossain. In a letter dated February 25, 1928, he writes to Qazi Motahar Hossain: “I cannot tolerate that a woman – an epitome of beauty – should fall prey to mathematics. A woman should be a goddess of beauty. Why should she guard the store of mathematics?” (15-16).

In another letter to Qazi Motahar Hossain, dated March 8 1928, Nazrul compares Fazilatunessa’s indifference to him to Fanny Brawne’s indifference to Keats. (We know now that this was not really so, but it was believed at the time that Fanny Brawne did not return Keats’ love). Nazrul says that he thinks about Shelley and Keats all the time. To Motahar Hossain Nazrul writes,

Ar’Ov, Avgvi i t³ tkuj tK wKUm tK GtZv Kti Abyfe Ki wQ tKb? ej tZ cvi? wKUan&Gi wCqy d’wbtK tj Lv Zui KweZv cto gtb nt’Q, thb G KweZv AwgB wj tL tMwQ | wKUan&Gi Otmvi -t_0U0 ntqWj N Avi ZtZB gj j I tk tI N Aek Zvi tmvm’nvU’wK bv tK ej te! N KÉC0 vn ti vtM AwgI fMwQ XvKv t_ tK Gtm Aewa, i ³ I DVtQ gvtS gvtS N Avi gtb nt’Q Awg thb wKUan& tm tKvb d’wbi w’i æY wlogZvq nqtZv ev Avgvi I e tKi Pvcav i ³ tZgwb Kti tKvbw b tkl Sj tK DtV Avgvq wetaqi eti i gtZv Kti i wOtq w tq hte | (109)

[Why do I feel Shelley and Keats coursing through my blood? Can you tell me why? I was just reading the poem written by Keats to his beloved Fanny. I felt that I myself had written that poem! Keats was diagnosed with a “sore throat”³ and he died from that, but who knows if the source of that was the heart? Ever since I left Dacca, I have also been suffering from a burning throat. Sometimes, I have been coughing blood – and I feel that I am Keats! Just like him, maybe I have been hurt by the cruelty of “some Fanny” causing this blood in my heart to ooze out in a last attempt to make me colourful as a groom.] (18-19)

While we do not know which poem Nazrul was referring to when he says he was reading the poem written by Keats to Fanny, it is quite possible that he was referring to “Bright Star.” Keats’ poem apostrophizes the Pole Star, wishing that he could be as steadfast as it. However, he does not want to be distant, removed, but pillowed upon his “fair love’s ripening breast.” Thus he will live forever or else swoon to death.

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art –
 Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
 And watching, with eternal lids apart,
 Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
 The moving waters at their priestlike task
 Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
 Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
 Of snow upon the mountains and the moors –
 No – yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
 Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
 To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
 Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
 Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
 And so live ever – or else swoon to death.

In his letter to Fanny Brawne, dated July 3, 1819, Keats juxtaposes love and death which contradict each other in the last line of the poem: "I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute." Keats ends his letter by imaging Fanny as Venus, the evening star, the star of the goddess of love, rather than as the Pole Star – which is the "steadfast star": "I will imagine you Venus tonight and pray, pray, pray to your star like a Heathen. Your's ever, fair Star."

In his letter to Qazi Motahar Hossain, however, Nazrul images himself as the star: "Remember to look at the sky and think that the star which is the farthest and shines the brightest is me. Give it my name." Nevertheless, Nazrul's imagined identification with Keats and the juxtaposition of love and death which may be seen in Keats' poem and letter are apparent in Nazrul's letter as well: "gZi#K GZ K#i g#b K#i #Kb R#b? I #K AvR Avgvi me#P#q my` i g#b n#`Q e#j | g#b n#`Q, R#e#b th Avg#q w#i #q w` #j , gi #Y #m Avg#q ei Y K#i #b#e|" (109) [You know why I think of death all the time? It's because it seems most beautiful to me. I keep thinking that the one who has rejected me in life, will be the one to accept me in death. (19)]

Nazrul's letter ends with him saying that he constantly dreams of Keats and Fanny Brawne: "t#K#ej w#K#U#n#K `#c#d` L#Q #N Z#i c#v#k `w#o#q d#w#b e#D#b| c#v`#i i g#Z#v|" (113) [I have been constantly dreaming of Keats, and standing next to him is Fanny Brawne. Like a stone (19)].

There are eighteen letters by Keats to Fanny Brawne dating from July 3, 1819 to sometime in May 1829, but only one extant letter from Nazrul to Fazilatunnessa. The letter is undated, but would approximately have been written around the third week of March. In this letter, he does not talk about his love for her, but wishes her

Eid Mubarak and wants to know if she would allow him to slightly edit a story she had sent to *Saogat*. He praises her as an extraordinary woman while he is an ordinary poet. He tells her that he has chosen his best poems and songs for a collection titled *Sanchita* and would like to dedicate it to her. At the end, though, Nazrul did not dedicate it to her. Apart from this extant letter, Nazrul wrote a long poem for her. Dated March 20, it was initially titled “Rahashyamayi” (The Mysterious Girl) but was published as “Tumi More Bhuliyachho” (You Have Forgotten Me). According to Qazi Motahar Hossain, in “Smripote Nazrul” (Memories of Nazrul), it was sent to him along with a letter.⁴ Later, when she was leaving for England, he wrote “Barsha-Biday.”

Fazilatunnessa did not return Nazrul’s love as far as we know. First of all, he was a married man. It is true that, in Islam, a man may marry more than one wife. However, it is possible that the brilliant young woman did not think much of the poet. She was the first Muslim woman to be awarded the MA degree from Dacca University. The editor of *Saogat* – to which she occasionally sent articles and stories – organized a reception for her. Shortly after completing her MA, she went to England for doctoral studies. However, she had to return for family reasons and could not complete her PhD. She took up a position at Bethune College – where she had studied earlier before getting admission to the University of Dacca. She became Head of the Department of Mathematics and then Vice Principal. When the country was partitioned in 1947, she moved to Dacca where she became Principal of Eden College. Years later when rumors arose of a love affair with Nazrul, she was very upset.

It was not only in his personal letters that Nazrul thought of Keats. Despite his active rebellion against the British Raj, he could relish English poetry – and the American poetry of Walt Whitman. In “Bartaman Bishwa Sahitya” (World Literature Today),⁵ Nazrul brings in Shelley, Keats, and Whitman to discuss early twentieth century literature. The only non-Europeans he includes are Rabindranath Tagore and Yonejiro Noguchi, a Japanese writer. It is unlikely that Nazrul could have read the more than thirty writers from Ireland, Russia, Norway, Sweden, England, Spain, Poland, France, Italy, and Japan he mentions in the essay. In fact, he does make an occasional error. Nevertheless, his comments are apt and it is remarkable because he did not have the resources that we have today. It is true that he could easily have picked up the names of Nobel Prize winners, but how did he know the Japanese Noguchi well enough to quote part of Buson’s haiku which Noguchi quotes?⁶ Many of the writers whom Nazrul names, though they won the Nobel Prize for Literature, are unknown and little read today. Conspicuous by his absence in the list of contemporary writers is T. S. Eliot who had written his masterpiece *The Wasteland* in 1922, but did not receive his Nobel Prize till 1948.

Nazrul begins his essay by talking about two major types of writers: the dreamers and the children of the earth, with their feet on the ground. The dreamers are the ones who soar to the heavens, and Nazrul uses the image of the bird – an image which was common to both Shelley and Keats. However, Nazrul also includes Milton in this group – most possibly because he had not read Milton.

eZgVb wekfmwntZ'i w tK GKUz fVj Kti t`Ltj meM0tPvtL cto Zvi `yU ifc| GK ifc tm tkj xi Skylark-Gi gtZv, wge'tbi Birds of Paradise-Gi gtZv GB awj -gVj b cW_exi E'taV D'tV t'MP mUvb Kti, Zvi PiY KL'tbv ai vi gwU u'kKti bv; tKewj E'taV'N Av'ti v E'taV'D'tV t'cbtj vtKi Mvb tkv'bvq| GBLvtb tm t'cb-wenvi x|(165)

[Any observer who takes a close look at literature in the world today is bound to be struck by the fact that it has two distinct aspects. On the one hand, like Shelley's Skylark or Milton's Birds of Paradise, it is eternally soaring upwards to explore a heaven which has no affinity with the earth's grime and dirt, celebrating a world of fantasy and dreams. (184)]

Milton did not write about birds of paradise. Kazi Nazrul Islam perhaps used the phrase because he understood that the word “paradise” in the title of Milton's epic suggested a world beyond the confines of this earth. Nazrul's contrast was between the ethereal poet and the down-to-earth poet, the dreamer and the doer. Thus, he goes on to say that the other type of poet clings to the earth and cannot leave it behind.

Avi GK ifc tm GB gwUj cW_ex'tK Acvi ggZvq AvK'to at'i vtK N AUKvi w'bk'tZ, f'tqi i vtZ wenej w'ki thgb Kti Zvi gv'tK R'wotq vtK N Zi æj Zv thgb Kti mnm'w'kKo w t'q ai Yx-gvZvtK at'i vtK N t'Zgw'v Kti | GBLvtb tm gwUj `j vj |

[On the other hand, it has the semblance of an offspring of Mother Earth herself, clinging to its parents in the way a frightened child seeks the comfort of its mother's bosom in the dark, or the way the myriad roots of a plant or tree appear to hold the soil in a deep, affectionate embrace. (184)]

Nazrul sees Yeats and Tagore along with Noguchi on the side of the dreamers with Gorky,⁷ Johan Bojer,⁸ Bernard Shaw,⁹ Jacinto Benavente y Martínez¹⁰ on the other side. Gorky and Bojer, who wrote principally about the lives of poor farmers and fishermen, did not win the Nobel Prize though both were nominated several times.

The essay goes on to range over writers, most of whom had won the Nobel Prize. Nazrul speaks about several other Russian writers – Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Pushkin – as well as writers from Sweden, Norway, Italy, Spain, France, Poland. He also attempts to bring in the Ramayana, the Upanishads, and the Vedas. He sees the war between the dreamers and the realists as the war between the followers of Rama and the followers of Ravana. He sees some writers as part-dreamers and part-

realists. He suggests that there will be another cataclysm and describes the fascists with Kipling leading them in the vanguard.

Nazrul was perhaps doing too much – sometimes apparently even contradicting himself. He speaks about the rise of the revolutionary spirit in writers, brings in Marx and notes how Marx turned sterile stone into a Taj Mahal. However, before Nazrul attempts to embrace contemporary world literature and ancient Indian writing in one, he brings in two poets, one from England the other from America, and holds one up against the other. Thus he says, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (166). [Keats spoke for the dreamers when he wrote: “A thing of beauty is a joy ever” (“Endymion”) or when he said: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (186).] He sees Whitman as a child of the earth and quotes him.

Not Physiognomy alone –

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
The modern man I sing. (166)

The quotation from Whitman seems quite accurate, but a comparison with the actual lines will reveal that Nazrul was quoting from memory. The actual lines from “Song of Myself” read:

One’s-Self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse, I say the
Form
complete is worthier far,
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Scholars of Romantic literature debate whether the line “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” is spoken by the poet or the urn. If it is spoken by the urn, beauty and truth might not be synonymous with each other. However, like most persons who quote the line, Nazrul seems to have taken it as if it was the message of the poet.

As Nazrul ends the essay, on an almost prophetic note with another war in the offing, he imagines himself wafted back to a world of dreams, a world where the dreamer awaits “a glorious new day” as he listens in his dream “to the songs of Persian nightingales, the flutes of Arabian camel drivers or the voices of veiled Turkish maidens” (191).

In Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” too, the speaker wonders whether he is awake or

asleep: “Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?” The dreamer in Nazrul’s essay hears the sound of fighting and calls out a line from Keats’ poem. “ZL t̄b̄v Pvi c̄v̄k Kv̄ v̄-t̄Q̄v̄Q̄v̄i t̄n̄w̄j -t̄Lj v̄ P̄t̄j | Awḡ -t̄c̄ē t̄N̄v̄i B ēt̄j D̄w̄ - ‘Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!’” (170).

Nazrul in his *Bandhon Hara* and *Kubelika* discussed Rabindranath, suggesting his own shortcomings in comparison to Gurudev. In this essay, Nazrul saw Rabindranath as a dreamer – on the side of Keats – but at the end of the essay, as the sleeper-dreamer, he himself becomes the poet in Keats’s poem.

The line “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” perhaps also adumbrates Nazrul’s editorial “Amar Shundor” (My Beauty) which appeared in *Nabajug* on June 2, 1942. It is a very personal piece, tracing Nazrul’s life, describing its different phases, happy and sad, expressing the deep grief he felt at the death of his son Bulbul and how he turned to religion after it to find solace, his anger at the Creator for having given him this beautiful intelligent child and then taken him away before his fourth birthday. He talks about the illness of his beloved wife Pramila.¹¹ In other words, Nazrul was talking about the beauty and truth of his life – terrible though it might be. There is no reference to Keats here, but the idea expressed in the line that Nazrul had quoted in “Bartaman Bishwa Sahitya” ten years earlier must have been in his mind as he summed up what his life had been. It was one of the last pieces that Nazrul wrote, for later that year he grew so ill that he had to be admitted to a mental hospital for treatment.

Notes

1. Qazi Motahar Hossain (1897-1981) joined the newly established University of Dacca when it was founded in 1921 as demonstrator of physics. He was at the time still studying MA at Dacca College. In 1923, he was promoted to Assistant Lecturer.
2. Fazilatunessa, later Fazilatunessa Zoha (1905-1976), was the first Muslim woman student of the University of Dacca.
3. Nazrul transliterated the English phrase in Bangla.
4. “Smripote Nazrul” was published in Nazrul Academy Patrika in 1976. See Rafiqul Islam, *Biography of Kazi Nazrul Islam*. Translated by Nashid Kamal. Kabi Nazrul Institute, 2014, p. 336.
5. The essay appeared in the journal *Pratika* in 1932 and again the next year in *Bulbul*. See Nazruler Prabandha Samagra. Kabi Nazrul Institute, 2019, p. 265.
6. In this piece from “The Spirit of Japanese Poetry,” Noguchi was quoting a haiku by Buson which reads in full “Oh, how cool – / The sound of the bell/ That leaves the bell itself.” *Selected English Writings: An East-West Literary Assimilation Vol. 2*, edited by Yoshinobu Hakutani. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992, p. 75.
7. Alexei Maximovich Peshkov (March 28, 1868 - June 18, 1936), primarily known as Maxim Gorky, was a Russian writer and political activist. Though he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature five times, he did not receive the prize.

8. Johan Bojer (March 6, 1872 - July 3, 1959) was a Norwegian novelist and dramatist, who wrote principally about the lives of poor farmers and fishermen. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature five times.
9. George Bernard Shaw (July 26, 1856 - November 2, 1950), with his more than sixty plays, was the leading dramatist of his generation. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925.
10. Jacinto Benavente y Martínez (August 12, 1866 - July 14, 1954) was a Spanish dramatist. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1922.
11. Pramila fell ill in 1939, and died in 1962.

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