Raising a Flag for Nazrul: 
Poetry, Language and Bangladesh's National Profile

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Abstract

The history of Bangladesh includes many outstanding cultural achievements, yet few around the world ever get to hear of them. There is no reason why the achievements of Bangladesh should not be better known, and this question of Bangladesh's image is crucial for other areas of development. But how might this challenge best be met? In this paper we seek to argue that one area in which Bangladesh has significant cultural capital is in world literature. Using Kazi Nazrul Islam as a case study, we also discuss how issues of language policy and translation skills are preventing the wider communication, enjoyment and recognition of Bangladesh's literary achievements. The compartmentalization of language specific proficiency is one example: many scholars' language proficiency is confined to either Bengali or English. There have also been paradoxical impacts proceeding from the post-liberation language policy in Bangladesh. Translation as an area of teaching has been neglected, and as a result Bangladesh's literary translators have not attracted world attention. Those who have ventured to translate Nazrul's work into English often opt for archaic language, driving off modern readers. Lack of patronage, initiatives and prioritization are additional problems.

Shantiniketana III.12 samskrit bhasha padhi linha

I have learned the Sanskrit language, so let all men call me wise: 
But where is the use of this, when I am floating adrift, and parched with thirst, and burning with the heat of desire? 
To no purpose do you bear on your head this load of pride and vanity. 
Kabir says: 'Lay it down in the dust and go forth to meet the Beloved. Address Him as your Lord.' 
Kabir (1398-1514) (translation by Tagore, 1973 [1915])

Since the salary shot up to Rs. 250
I have divorced Bengali and been wedded to Urdu. 
High hopes have blossomed on cruel labour
Urdu is the symbol of blue blood
(As close friends know)
I have taken up a strange tongue
For true aristocracy,
A tongue that would frighten the orderly and the coolie.
Nazrul, Language and Poetry in Bangladesh

Language and poetry are of course impossible to separate. As that most influential of twentieth century philosophers Martin Heidegger says, “Language itself is poetry in the essential sense” (1971: 72). The essential relationship that exists between poetry and language is also clear in the inspiration provided by poets during the Bengali Language Movement (*Bhasha Andalon*) of 1952 (Islam and Islam, 1986), and in the response of Begum Sufia Kamal (1911-1999) to the government of Pakistan’s banning of *Rabindra Sangeet* in the lead up to the birth centenary of Tagore in 1961. The relation of nation to both poetry and language is also recognised as having been essential to the focusing of ethno-linguistic consciousness during the War of Liberation in what is now Bangladesh, particularly the poetry of Tagore and Jibananda Das (1899-1954) (Islam and Islam, 1986). Moving on thirty years to the present decade, in a 2004 BBC Bengali Language Service poll seeking responses on the subject of the Greatest Bengali of all time, first place went to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibar Rahman, the founding leader of the nation, but he was followed by two poets, Rabindrinath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam in second and third place (Jones, 2008). We are therefore tempted to say that language, poetry and Bangladeshi nationhood are difficult to separate (see also Chaudhuri, 2004: 114).

Perhaps the subject of this paper, the great modern Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), may have wanted to challenge any simplistic identification of poetic accomplishment and the nation, at least if we take the following words from his essay *Hindu-Mussalman* as an indication: “Krishna-Muhammad-Christ have become national property. This property is the root of all trouble. Men do not quarrel for light but they quarrel over cattle” (Islam, 1926). Nevertheless, Nazrul’s poetry and songs are cited as having been a “major source of inspiration during the Liberation War of 1971” (Mitra, 2007: 93), a sentiment that is surely confirmed in his being brought as soon as possible to the new nation of Bangladesh in 1972, where he became the national poet, apt recognition for a poet who had so centrally represented the many-sided quest for freedom.

Nazrul himself lived a remarkable life, beginning with supporting himself through a childhood marked by poverty, pursuing an education through folk poetry while wandering with *letu* musicians and then developing a fondness for lyrical poetry at an assortment of schools in East and West Bengal; a period in the army during the First World War where the futility of being employed by an imperialist army further refined his interest in writing, especially after exposure to the Persian Sufi poet, Hafiz. The army had also sharpened his Bolshevik instincts, and he spent most of his twenties as a journalist-cum-poet-activist, a period marked most significantly with his jailing in 1922-23 by the British colonial authorities, who also placed bans on his work. As his fame increased his life became a busy mix of poetry, politics and popular song, not to forget family life, and this complexity must also be seen to reflect the numerous anti-imperial struggles then taking place throughout West and South Asia. Then, soon after the passing of Tagore, Nazrul was struck by a mysterious illness in 1942 that took away his powers of speech and memory. He remained an invalid until his death in 1976. Throughout his life Nazrul’s sympathies were clearly with struggles of ordinary folk and the downtrodden; if there is a single refrain through his work it is opposition to injustice, from whatever direction it might come.

Problems with Bengali Poetry Reception Outside Bangladesh

It is with this thread of militancy that we perhaps encounter the first problem with popularising Nazrul’s poetry outside of Bangladesh. This becomes clearer if we compare Nazrul with Tagore, who had won the Nobel Prize in 1913, largely on the basis of his self-translation of a collection of mystically inspired poems known as *Gitanjali* (also translated into French by André Gide). Educated in Bengali and English, and having visited England – even attending some classes at

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the University of London – in 1913 Tagore was a modernist of privileged upbringing whose idealism was still yet to be completely shaken by the behaviour of the British in India, and little of his oeuvre was yet known in Europe. Both the two poets, Nazrul and Tagore, loom large in Bengali culture and identity. Tagore was admired as a poet able to make an impact on the modern world on its own terms; Nazrul was loved for his ability to speak to both the daily and historical struggles of his people. Throughout the later part of his life Tagore suffered criticism from younger poets and critics unsatisfied with his disengagement and lack of social realism (Chaudhuri, 2004), while Nazrul has tended to disappoint those who would have preferred a poet who could take the stage with the world’s literary elite.

As a number of observers suggest, Tagore’s status in Bengali culture remains unchallenged, but interest outside the Bengali-speaking world has not lasted (Anisuzzaman, 2008; Sen, 2001). Nazrul, on the other hand, has never enjoyed a profile outside Bengali culture. But perhaps that simply speaks of an opportunity that has been missed, and World Literature is still to discover him. Meanwhile new poets continue to emerge in impressive number and quality.

Nazrul’s invisibility should not be a surprise, given that little translated Bengali poetry is read or heard outside India and Bangladesh (Maddern, 1977). This is a problem of both translation and an inability to market editions of a quality that might catch the attention of booksellers. As one translator, Caroline Wright (2000: 133), has noted recently, "the finest practitioners among Bengali translators include Calcutta-based Enakshi Chatterjee ...; Dhaka University English Professor Emeritus Kabir Chowdhury ...; Syed Manzoorul Islam, also a Dhaka University English professor; and poet Mohammad Nurul Huda. Islam and Huda have translated work by leading Bangladeshi poets. Unfortunately most books by these translators (all of whom, except Chatterjee, happen to be men) are published in small Indian and Bangladeshi editions, almost impossible to find outside the Subcontinent". Many of the products of the translators mentioned are highly competent, but they do not often succeed in the way modern translations of Chinese or Japanese poetry succeed in engaging both professional and "natural" readers of poetry, which is to say they do not often succeed as poems. Which is not to say Chinese and Japanese poetry have always enjoyed a reader's readership than poetry from the Subcontinent:

... it was not until Arthur Waley began publishing his series of books of translations from Chinese poetry in 1919 that anything of Far Eastern poetry was popularly known in English ... Previous translations had not been very effective. Those making them had been primarily linguists and the efforts of mastering the Chinese and Japanese language did not leave much energy for the consideration of literary qualities. Usually the standard for poetry translation was earlier 19th century English poetry of the popular type. Often a *tanka* or *haiku* was distorted into some form acceptable to one with a taste for the most conventional, such as a rhymed couplet, or a quatrain in iambics with a number of adjectives added. Rarely were the translators poets or even interested in poetry. But Arthur Waley showed that it was possible to make a translation which conveyed considerable of the original poem's style and content and was at the same time good reading and a stimulating discovery (Shiffert and Sawa, 1972: 33-34).

Waley’s *170 Chinese Poems* was published first in 1918, five years after Tagore had become something of a household name in Europe and the United States. Nazrul was still to publish his first mature poems. But already many professional readers of poetry were beginning to be critical of Tagore’s archaic diction, which was associated with an unearthly nineteenth-century religiosity. Budhadev Bose became aware of the dangers of the disjunct in Bengali and Western practice in poetry quite early through Pound.

Bose was not unaware of the tension concerning spiritual matters between Bengali and Western writing. In his defense of Tagore against Pound he wrote: “The only defect Pound notices in him is that his poetry is ‘pious’. This is natural, for in Europe poetry and
religion separated long ago; ... In India, this divorce has taken place only recently; it is still a common notion with us that the poet is a religious man ...” (An Acre of Green Grass) (Clifford, 2008: 6).

Bose here reminds us that in translation it is not simply a matter of languages coming together or diverging, but also histories. And it is important that translators of poetry in Bangladesh and abroad learn from both their own languages’ encounters with English and those of other nations.

The popular reception of traditional Chinese poetry in Anglophone countries, and the relative acceptance and prestige of Chinese poetry, was the outcome of a unique alignment of circumstances that ensured its rescue from being a mere curio brought home from the mysterious Orient to become instead an inspiration for a group of influential poets in the first decades of the twentieth century. The Imagists, including Pound, were initially excited by the brief image or moment of the Japanese haikai, which in formal terms they also viewed as a pure form of vers libre (traditional Japanese poetry used neither rhyme nor metre/stress, Shiffert and Sawa, 1972: 34). They were introduced to the Japanese poems and the new emphasis on the image via Paris and a small group of Anglophone poets known as the “Eiffel Tower circle”, and it was Pound who orchestrated the turn to China after receiving a manuscript from the American art historian and philosopher Ernest Fenollosa in 1913. Pound’s Cathay promptly appeared in 1915, followed in 1918 by the sinologist Arthur Waley’s One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems. As a later translator of classical Chinese poetry Angus Graham notes, “the element of poetry that travels best is of course concrete imagery” and “it is well known that glimpses of Japanese and Chinese poetry contributed to the clarification of the Imagist ideal, acting like the Japanese woodcut on Impressionism and African sculpture on Cubism” (Graham, 1977: 13, 15-16). It could also be demonstrated that the Imagist “Chinoiseries” reflected back on Anglophone habits of translating Chinese poetry and reading it in the twentieth century. Language is pared back and draws less attention to itself in its attempt to push forward the image.

The dovetailing or dialectical interaction of translation of Japanese and Chinese poetry with developments in poetry in modern and postmodern Europe and the United States continues to affect and shape translation reception. We might say that Chinese and Japanese poetry shaped the way Western readers understood what a poem was, how to read a poem and what they expected to see on the page. While the advent of Language Poetry has to some extent overturned this achievement for professional poetry readers of postmodern poetry, popular readership continues to be drawn to the singular image. How prescient it was of F S Flint, a leading figure in the Eiffel Tower circle, to declare in 1908, “To the poet who can catch and render, like the Japanese, the brief fragments of his soul’s music, the future lies open” (Martin, 1966). Tight irregularity was soon to marry Jazz, and not many years later Olsen announced the “open field”. Soon translations of Chinese poetry were not just spare, they were airy, and to be read in a semi-whisper. Ephemeral and ethereal combined to remind each generation of Oriental places far away.

Because translation is imperfect it is always multiple, contingent and open to revision. One of the lessons in this brief history of the translation of Japanese and Chinese poetry is that successful translations are timely. In other words, they reflect the shaping of poetry in the culture of the target language at the moment of translation. To take contemporary Bangladeshi translators of Nazrul as an example, to shape a poem in English for today’s readers (and we do not yet know what tomorrow’s readers will be like), they must have every opportunity to study and invest in contemporary poetry and poetry translation as these are practiced in the target language’s culture. This is an investment the Bangladeshi government and cultural policymakers should seriously consider making if Bangladesh is to change the broken-down image it currently has around the world today. This means investment must be made in training literary translators and funding them to travel and witness the shaping of contemporary World Poetry.
An expectation that good translation will come simply from language training and courses in translation will not produce translators with the kind of “effective historical consciousness” (or “historically effected consciousness,” Gadamer, 1989) needed to make translation travel. Put simply, translators, whether they are translating Nazrul or contemporary poets, must keep up to date across several horizons. In many parts of the world this tends to happen without planning, perhaps as a result of the dominant directions of global cultural flows. As a peripheral society (Islam and Islam, 1988), Bangladesh is not so fortunate. But she is fortunate in being home to many marvellous poets.

**Problems with Popularising Poetry in Translation**

How do we make Bangladesh’s poets and poetry travel more broadly? How do translations travel? How do we encourage them to do so? Are there not dangers encountered on such journeys (Cronin, 2000)?

At present, as a number of commentators have noted, Bangladeshi poetry in translation is not travelling (Wright, 2000; Maddern, 1977). Is this a problem of the poetry or of the translation, or both? As Budhadev Bose pointed out in *An Acre of Green Grass*, some of the problem may indeed exist with the dated nature of the poetry. By dated I mean poetry that is so marked by its time that it ceases to interest readers beyond certain historiographic needs. Poetry can be dated in this sense in at least two ways: it is either dated in terms of its language and/or form, or it is dated in terms of its historical context. One of the drawbacks of nationalist or testimonial literature, for example, can be a loss of bite the further we move from the moment in which it was created. Nationalist concerns in art also limit or territorialise literature, tending to “relegate” a writer to the place called “Third World Literature” and block admission into the First (Ahmad, 1992). So, danger number one, if Bangladesh’s poetry is predominantly concerned with explicitly addressing national questions, what kind of distortion is enacted translators select other kinds of subject matter for translation.

Ordinarily we understand the distortions of translation to originate with the translator. It is the translator who is the traitor. Yet as our analysis proceeds we realise how distortions are already operating around, upon and through the translator’s pen. And the distortions come from different directions: in Bangladesh, for example, I suspect much translation of Nazrul is performed as a form of commemoration (Appendix I); in other parts of the world, poetry from Bangladesh might be needed to make a conference program or an anthology look more complete; or poems in translation are prepared so that they may be performed for other poets at literary festivals. All of these different ways in which the poetry of Bangladesh travels will shape the outlook demanded by their purpose. Some translations are given a nineteenth-century feel because that is what is believed best honours the poet, allowing him to share the stage with Wordsworth or Whitman. Some translators search for a language that is philosophical or revolutionary, honouring the profundity or passion with which the poet has come to be identified. These kinds of “honouring” distortions are most likely to come from translators who identify with the source language.

If Bangladesh can invest in the translation of its poets by attempting to “sell” them in Europe and America there are still other dangers. The most successful translations or anthologies will in all likelihood be made by Anglophone translators or at least co-translators. Or even re-translators, as seen in the example of Rumi (1207-1273) where the most popular translators have often only had the slightest links to the poem in the original language (Lewis, 2007: 564-615). This process poses problems such as “To what extent should the world’s image of Nazrul be determined by overseas fashion?” Some translators of Chinese poetry of late, such as Tony Barnstone or David Hinton, may have missed Angus Graham’s warnings on the translator’s tendency to “obliterate much of the diversity of the material he works on ... If the reader feels
that Tu Fu, Li Ho and Li Shang-yin sound much alike, I shall have failed ...” (Graham, 1977: 31-32). Hinton, perhaps returning to the inspiration of early twentieth-century Imagists, has been cutting up Tang dynasty regulated verse into strings of what look like Japanese haikai (Appendix II). Both of these early twenty-first century translators of classical Chinese poetry, however, may be doing no more than respond to what twenty-first century readers expect a Chinese poem to look (and feel) like. It is hard to know what might become of Nazrul under this kind of trend. Nationalist or political connections compromise living poets, but what about deceased poets who occupy a place in a national heritage?

**Conclusion**

The question of who gets to decide the international face of Bangladesh’s poetic heritage goes to the heart of the politics of representation and cultural imperialism. Globalisation has often exacerbated these problems by making each nation’s heritage vulnerable to de-territorialisation via the interests of global electronic media. The way the publishing industry operates today there is little doubt that poetry translation in the main now falls under this last sector, whether we are talking about online or on-paper publication. Up until now there has been little interest in Nazrul internationally, but that could change before long. Subalternist academic fashion has only just recently turned its attention to Tagore (Chakrabarty, 2000), a remarkably late interest after thirty years for what Rosinka Chaudhuri has described as a group of intellectuals with “deeply *bhadralok* – Bengali genteel bourgeois – instincts” (2004: 104). It is just as remarkable that Nazrul, given the many ways his life and art suit the subalternist project, has been completely ignored.

Nazrul will not, and should not, continue to be ignored. As Nazrul’s heritage is about to enter a period of likely subalternist interpretation how well placed are Bangladesh’s translators to both participate in and shape what will be a growing international profile? Translation is entangled in questions of appropriation, representation and misrepresentation. Like languages and nations, it is also entangled in history. Translation is not just a matter of theft or treason, but an opportunity for cultures to travel, and meet and converse. English translation does open up Bangladesh and her poets to forces of cultural power that are dangerous. Yet English translation that takes place on the basis of proper conversations need not be a “sell out”, for English translation of poetry also takes Bangla into the Anglophone world (Benjamin, 1992), opens up the Anglophone world to invasion from Bangla words, phrasings and longings in ways that Anglophone literature never can. And what better way to launch such a “poetic invasion” than through Nazrul, Nazrul translated by skilled internationalist Bangladeshi translators and poets so that the world might get to know Bangladesh better.
References


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Hope

I shall perhaps find thee, darling,
At the distant horizon
Where the stooping sky kisses
The dark green of the clustering trees.
At the lonely meadow
Of the distant hamlet
Or by the quiet bank of the village tank
Thou wilt perhaps appear alone,
Smiling sweetly,
And take my hands in thine own.
Beyond the blue of that sky
Thy unveiled eyes are sparkling,
And the southern wind
Is thy secret emissary
Bringing thy news for me.

Thou art the impish maiden
Fleeting through the woods,
Thou wilt come all on a sudden
And kiss my eyes fondly.
There at the distant horizon
The gorgeous sun in his brilliant rays
Is writing out that message.

translation by K Chowdhury
Hope

Perhaps I shall meet thee
Where the sky bends low to kiss the
green fringe of the forest.
Perhaps in the far-off village meadow,
On grassy landmarks, or on the solitary bank,
Thou wilt meet me with a smile
hold my hand thyself alone —
The news of thy unveiled beauty
from across that leafy forest
is conveyed by the secret messenger
— the south wind of the other land

Though naughty fellow, thou amongst
the leaves wilt stealthily come
and softly kiss my sleeping eyes
and go away — the secret is
being written there in the golden
characters of the setting sun
in the western horizon

translation by Abdul Hakim
Hope

Perhaps we shall meet
Where the bending sky kisses
The green wilderness.

Yonder, in the village field
On the ridges or the desolate quay
Perhaps you shall come smiling
And clasp my arms.

Your unveiled glances,
In that impervious blue
Bring the secret message
From the southern breeze.

In the chinks of the wilderness.
Oh dear,
Your gentle kisses on my eyes
Remain enshrined
In the horizon’s golden hue.

translation by Syed Mujibul Huq
Hope

Perhaps I shall meet you
where the sky bends down
to kiss the green horizon!

Perhaps in the distant village meadow,
on a ridge-path or the solitary bank,
with a sweet smile
you’ll take my hand in yours!

The southern breeze
from across the horizon
tells me secretly about your beauty
behind your veil!

Before returning to the woods,
mischievous you!—you’ll softly
lay a kiss on my eyes!
The sun has written all this
on the horizon.

translation by Sajed Kamal

Sitting in mystic bamboo grove, back unseen
Press stops of long whistle
Deep forest unpierced by man
Moon and I face each other.

  translation by Ezra Pound

Bamboo Lane House

Sitting alone, hid in bamboo
Plucking the lute and gravely whistling.
People wouldn't know that deep wood
Can be this bright in the moon.

  translation by Gary Snyder

Bamboo-Midst Cottage

Sitting alone in recluse bamboo dark
I play a ch’ìn, settle into breath chants.

In these forests depths no one knows
this moon came bathing me in light.

  translation by David Hinton