

Come, O Comet! Build a Bridge of Fire Across Darkness!¹: A Theological Reflection on the Bhakti-Mysticism of Kazi Nazrul Islam

Rachelle Syed

Much has been written on Kazi Nazrul Islam in terms of his poetry, political activism, and depending on the author, his spirituality as either a Muslim mystic or his devotion to the goddess Kālī as a bhakta. There are also those that insist that he was only a Muslim, or only a Hindu, each side sometimes attempting to claim him as their poet. His involvement in both traditions is often explained away as poetic whimsy or a tool of political advantage. In this paper I examine Nazrul's life and poetry, exploring themes of belonging and spiritual complexity in order to elucidate the value of the liminal spaces formed by religious interchange and common purpose. Importantly, this essay examines Nazrul's religiosity as he expressed it and while I do not attempt a theological evaluation of his orientation, it does become clear that there is theological value in it that offers a meaningful contribution to the contemporary study of religion and interreligious engagement, interchange, and dialogue.

Keywords: Islam, Kazi Nazrul, Theology, Political Activism, Sufism, Muslim, Bengal, India, Hindu, Kali, Bhakti, Mysticism, Interfaith, Liminal

The Life of Kazi Nazrul Islam

Born on May 24, 1899, into a poor family in Churulia, West Bengal, Kazi Nazrul Islam was sometimes called *Dukhu* (sorrowful one)² or Tarakhyapa (after the saint to whom his mother prayed for a son).³ He received his first education at a *maktab*, a Muslim school, in Arabic, Persian and Urdu as well as Islamic history and customs.⁴ This education was augmented by Nazrul's proximity to a number of significant shrines, such as the *Pirpukur*, a large water tank said to be dug by a Muslim saint whose grave sits on the eastern bank while a mosque occupies the western bank.⁵ Nazrul's father was Kazi Fakir Ahmed, an imam who died in 1908, after which the young Nazrul accepted his father's duties,⁶ including the care of local shrines which deepened his knowledge of rural Muslim life in Bengal and may have piqued his interest in the supernatural.⁷ Eventually, Nazrul found his way to local *leto* troupes, folk-music parties where he gained experience with the *purāṇas* and later began his own compositions.⁸ In 1917, he joined the 49th Bengal Regiment and

¹ This title is taken from Rabindranath Tagore, who was quoted as speaking about Kazi Nazrul Islam in this instance. Peter Custers, "Kazi Nazrul Islam: Bengal's Prophet of Tolerance," *The Newsletter* (Spring 2009) <https://iiias.asia/the-newsletter/article/kazi-nazrul-islam-bengals-prophet-tolerance>.

² June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 183. McDaniel suggests that this nickname may be due to the family's poverty and hardships, and throughout his life, Nazrul's experience with death, illness, and poverty shaped his artistic and political endeavors. This is relevant in light of his *bhakti*, as shall be explored.

³ Gopal Haldar, *Kazi Nazrul Islam* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1973), 10.

⁴ Priti Kumar Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam: Poetry and History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 22.

⁵ Mitra, 21–22.

⁶ Rafiqul Islam, "Kazi Nazrul Islam," *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*, http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Islam,_Kazi_Nazrul. Accessed May 21, 2019

⁷ Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 22. It is not uncommon for worshipers, both Muslim and Hindu, at such sites to seek miracles or supernatural intervention for problems and challenges.

⁸ Haldar, *Kazi Nazrul Islam*, 23.

was posted in Karachi where he continued to learn Persian and practice music, giving him the opportunity to explore new styles and instruments. In 1919, his first poems were published while in Karachi.

Throughout his youth, Nazrul was profoundly impressed with the revolutionaries and freedom fighters he met and became interested in politics upon his return to then British-occupied Kolkata where he composed and sang revolutionary songs. While in Kolkata, Nazrul briefly wrote for *Śebak*, a daily newspaper owned by a revivalist Muslim, Maulana Akram Khan. Khan later edited an obituary Nazrul had written for his favorite poet, Satyendra Nath Datta, a Hindu, to remove Nazrul's heavy use of Hindu imagery. Appalled, Nazrul never returned to work.⁹ Frustrated by such experiences, Nazrul published the article *Hindu Musalman* on September 2, 1922: "...I cannot tolerate the *Tikism*¹⁰... and Beardism. Tiki is not Hinduism. It may be the sign of the pundit. Similarly, beard is not Islam, it may be the sign of the mollah. All the hair-pulling have originated from those two tufts of hair."¹¹

In the same article, Nazrul goes on to say that the messages and manifestations of the Divine are for all peoples, not for individual nations: "Muhammad, Krishna and Christ have become national property. This property is the root of all trouble. Men do not quarrel for light but they quarrel over cattle."¹² By this, Nazrul refers not just to India as a nation, but to distinct religious communities as individual nations that waste valuable time and energy on unimportant matters while in the midst of true suffering. Nazrul's hope for unity is well-captured by the publication of his own newspaper in August, 1922, *Dhūmketu* (Comet), the first issue of which sold out in two hours.¹³ In honor of its release, Rabindranath Tagore welcomed the publication thusly: "Awaken with a flush of light; Those who are half-conscious."¹⁴ While the newspaper was still in operation (it closed in 1923) Nazrul published *Bidrohi* (the Rebel) in the twelfth issue, calling for resistance against British occupation. Nazrul was arrested for this poem and later went on a hunger strike, but did not cease composing.¹⁵ By this time, Nazrul had earned the nickname "rebel poet of India."

After calling off his engagement to a Muslim woman, Nazrul fell in love with a Hindu girl, Ashalata Sengupta, the daughter of family friends. Nazrul later renamed her "Pramila" and announced his love for her in his poem *Bijayini* (Lady Victorious): "O my Queen! I acknowledge defeat to you, today, at long last; My banner of victory rolls down at thy feet."¹⁶ While Ashalata's family loved Nazrul, they were shocked by his proposal, striking them "like a thunderbolt without clouds."¹⁷ Rachel Fell McDermott quotes a relative as saying, "They loved this gentle-hearted, affection-craving, always smiling young man, but could they accept a vagabond, undisciplined, unemployed man as a son-in-law?"¹⁸ Eventually, Nazrul and Pramila did marry and gave their

⁹ Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 54–55.

¹⁰ Tiki is a tuft of never cut hair kept on the head by some Hindus as a mark of auspiciousness.

¹¹ Nafisa Ahsan Nitu and Mohammad Ehsanul Islam Khan, "Treatment of Religiousness in Kazi Nazrul Islam," *International Journal of English Research* 3, no. 6 (November 2017): 23.

¹² Nitu and Khan, 22–23.

¹³ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*, 184.

¹⁴ Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 55.

¹⁵ Bruno Nettl et al., eds., *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, V. 5 (New York: Garland Pub, 1998), 853.

¹⁶ Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 54.

¹⁷ Rachel Fell McDermott, "A 'Muslim' Poet in the Lap of a 'Hindu' Mother: Kazi Nazrul Islam and the Goddess Kālī," in *The Goddess*, ed. Mandakranta Bose, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 286.

¹⁸ McDermott, 286.

sons names, such as Krishna Muhammad, to emphasize both parent’s religious traditions. Nazrul also inaugurated several Durgā Pūjā festivals and joined a hunger fast in 1924 to protest the treatment of a Hindu *mahānt*, chief priest, at Tarakeshwar Temple.¹⁹

In 1930, Nazrul’s second son passed away; and in 1939, Pramilla became mysteriously paralyzed from the waist down. Then, in 1941, Rabindranath Tagore, with whom Nazrul had a friendly relationship, passed away; and within a year, Nazrul became mysteriously ill with what some physicians now believe to have been Pick’s disease, a rare form of dementia.²⁰ Gradually, Nazrul lost his voice and memory, living in silence for 34 years until he died in 1976. Pramila, as she lay dying in 1962 and having been paralyzed for 23 years, asked her sons to bury her in the Muslim fashion, rather than cremate her²¹, so that she could lie next to Nazrul when his time came.²² After the partition of Bangladesh, Nazrul and his remaining family were brought to Dhaka, though by this time, Nazrul is unlikely to have been aware of what was happening around him. Nazrul was honored in Bangladesh and made an honorary citizen in 1976. He died later that year and was buried with state honor on the Dhaka University campus, far from Pramila’s resting place in Churuliya, West Bengal.²³

Bengal’s Multireligious Context

To do a full review of Bengal’s history would exceed the boundaries of this paper²⁴, but of interest here are those aspects of Bengali history and culture that would have provided Nazrul with a community in which he could continue to grow as an artist and devotee. These include: *letu* musical groups, *Jāri Gān*, and the *Bauls*.

Leto Parties & Jāri Gān

Leto groups are bands of folk musicians within which a primary poet, the *Goda Kavi*, might lead impromptu lyrical battles with other leto groups. Nazrul was initiated into his local leto group by his uncle and became the leader of a party by the time he was fourteen years old.²⁵ During this time Nazrul composed several songs that covered topics related to the history and majesty of the region, as well as topics related to the Mughal emperor, Akbar.²⁶ Nazrul’s participation in a leto group is well documented, and while the historical record, to the best of my knowledge, does not indicate he was a member of other musical groups in Bengal, other groups and communities did exist that lent themselves to the artistic and devotional complexity of the region. It is reasonable to

¹⁹ McDermott, 286–87.

²⁰ “Nazrul’s Treatment in Europe,” *International Center of Nazrul*, updated 2020, <https://www.icnazrul.com/index.php/nazrul-s-life/29-nazrul-s-illness-and-treatment>.

²¹ McDermott observes that while Pramila never formally became a Muslim, and observed the outward appearance of a married Hindu woman, such as putting *sindūr* in the parting of her hair, no one had ever seen her perform any religious rites. Her choice of burial seems to therefore be a matter of her love for Nazrul and not concern for a particular burial requirement.

²² McDermott, “A ‘Muslim’ Poet in the Lap of a ‘Hindu’ Mother,” 287.

²³ McDermott, 290.

²⁴ See Richard M. Eaton, ed. *India’s Islamic Traditions: 711–1750* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008) and *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1240–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). See also Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983) and similar works.

²⁵ Haldar, *Kazi Nazrul Islam*, 11.

²⁶ Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 23.

imagine the way these other groups influenced each other or reflected typically porous boundaries, especially where artistic expression and spirituality meet. A *jāri gān*, for example, derives from Persianate traditions around the suffering at Karbala, where Muhammad's grandson Hussein and much of his family were martyred. While it may be seen as a collection of specifically Muslim themes, Hindus are known to participate in it. Indeed, despite political and historical turmoil, it is common to see Muslims and Hindus participating in each other's holidays and visiting shrines throughout India.²⁷ It is for this reason that, while the *jāri gān* is sometimes referred to as secular, I think it more appropriate to view it as interreligious.

The Bauls

The Bauls made a major impact on Bengali folk music since at least the late nineteenth century. They included a rejection of traditional religious institutions and social hierarchies and placed emphasis on the elusive "Man of the Heart,"²⁸ or *maner manush*, referring to the Divine spirit within the human body and regarded as "the eternal beloved in relation to the human personality."²⁹ Seen as "crazy lovers," the Bauls generally avoid populated areas, are sometimes referred to as wandering minstrels, and to some their religious practices are seen as morbid or neurotic.³⁰ Indeed, in Bangla *baul* means mad or crazy. The religious literature of the Bauls lives mostly in their music and displays a philosophy of Divine immanence, harkening to a tantric ontology wherein the Divine is both transcendent and immanent.³¹ Before the partition of Bangladesh, it was not unusual to see a Muslim Baul with a Hindu guru, and vice versa, though after the 1971 partition of Bangladesh, most Hindu Bauls stayed in India while most Muslim Bauls went to Bangladesh.³² While it doesn't appear Nazrul was himself a Baul, as a musician in the same geographical area during a height of Baul popularity, it is difficult to imagine that Nazrul was not somehow influenced by them.

Nazrul The Muslim

Most biographers that write on Nazrul's religiosity tend to refer to him as a Muslim mystic. Indeed, Nazrul's disconcert for rigid boundaries, empty displays of religious affiliation and employment of music and poetry to describe an esoteric spiritual world all fall under what might be considered "mystical" experience. Yet, referring to one as a "mystic" sometimes allows for the avoidance of a deeper investigation into the context from which that mysticism arose, both within the individual and outside of them. In this case, Nazrul's Islamic mysticism sits somewhat comfortably alongside the work of other mystics such as Kabir and Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, as we shall see.

²⁷ Antu Saha, *Ethnic Identity and Religion in the India-Bangladesh Borderlands* (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 167. For example, see Afsar Mohammad, *The Festival of Pīrs: Popular Islam and Shared Devotion in South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives from Village India* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁸ Hugh B. Urban, *Songs of Ecstasy: Tantric and Devotional Songs from Colonial Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16.

²⁹ Piyushkanti Mahapatra, *The Folk Cults of Bengal*, vol. no. 19 (Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1972), 9.

³⁰ Mahapatra, no. 19:9.

³¹ Mahapatra, no. 19:10–11. In the case of Śākta Tantra, Divine immanence is well explained in Rita Sherma, "God the Mother and Her Sacred Text: A Hindu Vision of Divine Immanence," in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Philosophy and Gender*, ed. Veena R Howard (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

³² Saha, *Ethnic Identity and Religion*, 166–67.

As noted above, Nazrul Islam was born what is now West Bengal. He was raised as a Muslim. His father was caretaker of the local mosque, a duty which fell to Nazrul when his father died. Nazrul was schooled thoroughly in Islamic tenets and Arabic. Later in life, he would translate some Arabic works, including several chapters of the Qur’an, into Bangla.³³

Two perspectives can help us explore the Muslim spirituality of Nazrul: his position in relation to Muslim revivalism in Bengal, and the expression of his Islamic faith through his poetry. With regard to Muslim revivalism, having learned something about Nazrul’s early life in the midst of diverse artistry, it is perhaps unsurprising that he did not take favor with Muslim revivalism in Bengal. Nazrul’s dissent became a large part of his political activism, one of the primary ways in which Nazrul is remembered today. The Khilafat movement of the early 1900s sought to pressure the British colonial government to preserve the authority of the Ottoman Sultan as the caliph of Islam after the first world war. There has been some debate as to whether this movement was pan-Islamic or focused on a pan-Indian Muslim mobilization; but Nazrul apparently viewed it as reactionary and perhaps exclusionary, a betrayal of India’s greater heritage as a diverse nation.

A great admirer of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Nazrul wrote poetry praising the Turkish revolution’s vision and victory against Greek invaders. However, Nazrul’s apparent praise of a secularist ideology was not an abandoning of religion or spirituality; rather, it was just a refusal to let one be the ruling power over all others. Nazrul was known as a “double dissenter,” as he opposed the Khilafat movement and British rule at the same time. “On the one hand, it [Nazrul’s double dissent] meant Nazrul’s sudden and sharp deviation from the contemporary Indian Muslim preoccupation with pan-Islamism. On the other hand, his fierce anti-British secular nationalism at once set him apart from the long-standing (Indian) Muslim politics of cooperation with the British.”³⁴ To most Indian Muslims of the day, one could truly be anti-British only if one were doing so under the umbrella of the caliphate. Nazrul, however, opposed both the British and the Khilafat movement, yet did not renounce or denounce religion. In fact, Nazrul’s Islam was foundational in his understanding of the fight for freedom—just not one that leads to Islamic rule of India. Nazrul rejected the outward rituals and paraphernalia of Muslims as non-essential and distracting from the greater spiritual potential of Islam, a key aspect of which was the fight for freedom.

Interestingly, Nazrul was an opponent of Gandhi’s nonviolence, and is quoted as saying, “Islam will never be rescued through these religious hypocrisies; the characteristic feature of Islam is the sword, neither bard, nor prayer, nor fasting.”³⁵ This did not age well in the modern political climate, particularly since 2001. However, it must be remembered that to Nazrul, Islam was the religion of the freedom fighter and he was living under the oppression of British colonization. It is important to remember that when the British came to Bengal, they were deeply frustrated by their inability to tell the Bengali Muslims apart from the Hindus (not to mention other traditions). One of the most damaging things the British did to India was to institute a census that created stark divisions between people at the local and national levels.³⁶

³³ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*, 185.

³⁴ Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 193–94.

³⁵ Mitra, 194–95.

³⁶ Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 19–21.

With regard to the role of poetry in Nazrul's faith, recall that—as a child, Nazrul was given the responsibilities of his father and made responsible for his already impoverished family. It is conceivable that Nazrul found great comfort in the multireligious communalism of his *leto* troupe. It is one of those spaces with which the British were so frustrated, and effectively sought to destroy—since a divided community was weaker. This theme recurs throughout Nazrul's life, and perhaps reminded him of the songs of the *jāri gān*, especially those inspired by the martyrdom of Karbala, in which a small group of people led by al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī, Muhammad's grandson, stood against a mighty empire, though they paid for it with their lives. Indeed, the events of Karbala are featured in some of Nazrul's poetry, such as *I am a Proud Muslim Woman*.³⁷ Aside from the call to fight back against the British, elsewhere Nazrul also expressed faith in the fraternity and democracy he saw as inherent to Islam, especially that of the inherent equality of humanity.

In an effort to effectively employ these principles (which certainly are not *only* belonging to Islam) Nazrul sought to secularize these principles (harkening back to his admiration of Atatürk) for the sake of promoting Muslim-Hindu *unity*.³⁸ Unfortunately, Nazrul's call fell largely onto deaf ears. For example, at Nazrul's insistence, Pramila never converted to Islam. This was not an issue for many Muslims in the Bengali context, but it was for those calling for an politically motivated Muslim revivalism. Shortly before their wedding, journalist A.D. Kamruzzaman wrote an article complaining that a Hindu wife's influence would further de-Islamize the poet, whose Islam was already in question by such figures and whom Kamruzzaman perceived as “under pressure” from the Hindus around him. After the wedding, another letter was published in a local paper congratulating the couple, but insisting that the new wife must convert to Islam and expressing a hope that such an arrangement could set an example, perhaps in the conversion of Hindus to Islam.³⁹

Knowing what we do about the views Nazrul maintained throughout his life, it is understandable why he did *not* want Pramila to convert. There are therefore two primary points to be derived from what Nazrul saw as his Islamically-informed political views: (1) that the spirit of Islam would be betrayed if an Islamic nationalism or ruler had the power to disrupt the unity of Muslims and Hindus, and (2) that Islam was, for Nazrul, about the noble fight against oppression, which while it may have seemed fierce and violent on its surface, was, to him, an act of communal cohesion, love, and justice.

The political sphere is not the only place Nazrul's Islamic faith lived. As he did in many areas of his life, his faith found its way into his poetry. At times, Nazrul uses overtly Islamic language, like love of the Prophet Muhammad, but often his poetry is read through the lenses of scholars *looking for* Nazrul's Muslim identity as an exemplar of Islamic piety. Such a lens encourages the assumption that most of Nazrul's poetry and songs can be read as influenced only or primarily by his faith as a Muslim. This assumption will be challenged later on, but here let us explore some of his overtly Islamic poetry.

³⁷ Nazrul Islam, “I Am a Proud Muslim Woman,” Poetry archive, trans. Abu Rushd, Poemhunter.com, May 30, 2012, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/i-am-a-proud-muslim-woman/>.

³⁸ Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 195.

³⁹ Mitra, 199–200.

For Muslims, love of Allah cannot be had without love of the Prophet Muhammad, sometimes called *Rasul* (messenger). Nazrul is no exception. In his poem *One Who Meditates Upon the Prophet*, Nazrul illustrates the spiritual and theological link between the Prophet and God:

*One who meditates on the prophet
Has met God in a secret encounter.
One who is immersed in that name knows no sorrow
All the world to him is a living presence
The fortunate one who is borne by that flame's tide
Has known the Koran and the Hadith in the twinkling of an eye.
One whose mind is illuminated by my prophet,
He does not think of paradise, nor is frightened by hell.⁴⁰*

This poem seems to refer to the core Islamic tenet that a defining feature of Muslims is the acceptance and love of Muhammad as the prophet of God, and the belief that Muhammad is the living example of the Qur'an. In fact, this poem is reminiscent of the poetry of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 801) who when questioned as to why she was running with fire in one hand and water in the other replied: "I am going to burn paradise and douse hellfire, so that both veils may be lifted from those on the quest and they will become sincere of purpose. God's servants will learn to see him without hope for reward or fear of punishment. As it is now, if you took away hope for reward and fear of punishment, no one would worship or obey."⁴¹ Other elements of Islamic mysticism also appear present. Nazrul refers to meditating upon the prophet Muhammad and an apparently subsequent secret meeting with God, which seems to refer to the understanding that part of Muhammad's role was not to elevate his own status or influence but to teach believers how to develop their own relationship with God through prayer and other means of Islamic praxis. By referring to his meeting with God as "secret," Nazrul also appears to emphasize a profoundly personal relationship wherein his own ego-identification dissolves until sorrow no longer has meaning for him and "all the world...is a living presence." This reflects an awareness of the concept of *fanā'*, itself deeply rooted in Islamic mysticism and explored further below. Nazrul's love of Muhammad is further expressed as he refers to him as "my prophet" and when considered alongside the final stanza, emphasizes the role of love above fear of punishment or hope of reward, similar again to Rabi'a who when asked about the reality of her faith reminded listeners that to her, true faith, and love, transcends both hellfire and paradise.⁴² In such a poem, Nazrul's spiritual identity as a Muslim appears solidly confirmed. Likewise, in *Ahmad Chan Jodi Heshe* Nazrul wrote, "Two flowers have bloomed in Islam's garden's pool. These two pristine beauty [sic] are my Allah and Rasul."⁴³

Intriguingly, Nazrul begins his poem *Allah is My Lord, I Fear No One* by identifying himself as a Muslim (*my Lord*) and then identifying himself as part of the Muslim community (*our Prophet*):

Allah is my Lord, I fear no one,

⁴⁰ "One Who Meditates Upon the Prophet," Poetry archive, Poemhunter.com, 2012, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/one-who-meditates-on-the-prophet/>.

⁴¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 35th Anniversary Edition (University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 151.

⁴² Carl W. Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Boston ; London: Shambhala, 2011), 101–2.

⁴³ Nitu and Khan, "Treatment of Religiousness in Kazi Nazrul Islam," 23.

*Muhammad is our Prophet.
Throughout the world his praise is sung.
I have my Qur'an,
Why should I fear my one?
Islam is my religion,
The Kalima⁴⁴ is my amulet,
The Tauhid⁴⁵ my guide,
Iman⁴⁶ is my shield and the crescent my reading [light]⁴⁷
Allal-u-Akbar⁴⁸ 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 takbir⁴⁹,
Here we are one body one heart one soul
Here prince and pauper play some 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.⁵⁰*

In this popular translation by Kabir Chowdury, Sumaiya Ahmed and others see a Muslim who truly understands the Islamic concept of human fraternity.⁵¹ Here, Nazrul begins by identifying himself as “one of you” and then speaks of the connections between Muslims of diverse backgrounds, employs foundational Islamic beliefs and imagery, and clearly conveys a conviction that Islam has value and purpose in his own context. In this way, Nazrul inspired a sense of Muslim pride and rootedness in the Bengali and Bangladeshi context. Nevertheless, what makes Nazrul a mystic is not simply the fundamentals that ground him in Islam, but his revulsion for empty religiosity and superficial ritualism that he saw as coming at the cost of the true ethos of Islam (and other traditions). Nazrul was given a foundational Islamic education, was active in religious life, and through his poetry we see a *love* for Islam that includes his identification with it. This disdain for what Nazrul saw as unnecessary religious formalities that ultimately disrupt the human-Divine relationship has deep roots in Islamic thought.

⁴⁴ The content of the *shahada*, encapsulated by the first two lines.

⁴⁵ Usually transliterated as *tawhid*, the ultimate indivisibility of Allah.

⁴⁶ Faith

⁴⁷ The original translation offers this as “fight” but this is likely a typographical error.

⁴⁸ Literally, “God is Great.”

⁴⁹ The call of “God is Great.”

⁵⁰ Nazrul Islam, “Allah Is My Lord, I Fear No One,” Poetry archive, trans. Kabir Chowdhury, Poemhunter.com, May 30, 2012, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/allah-is-my-lord-i-fear-no-one/>.

⁵¹ Sumaiya Ahmed, “Contribution of Kazi Nazrul Islam to the Bengali Muslim Literature,” *Islam and Muslim Societies: A Social Science Journal* 8, no. 2 (2015): 99–100.

The theological concept of *fanāʾ*, for example, was known to the Bauls and flowed smoothly through their greater spirituality. *Fanāʾ* is the “total nullification of the ego-consciousness” in which only the “Unity of Reality” remains.⁵² Put another way, *fanāʾ* is the ultimate realization of the Absolute is precluded by the total annihilation of individual existence.⁵³ It is a state of desiring the love-in-aloneness, as all that is real is in fact the Real, the Ultimate Divine. Therefore, a pure love is the only way to truly realize the Real: “Through ecstasy of the purest love the mystic passes in the *fanāʾ* which is the passing-away of the human in the Divine. The fire of love burns into ashes the bundle of complexes from which emerges the false notion of the ‘I-ness,’ and through pangs of heart the ice of ‘I-ness’ melts into a flow of tears and the ‘I’ in man and the ‘He’ in man become one and the same.”⁵⁴ As mentioned, there is no evidence that Nazrul himself was a Baul, but it is the echoing of *fanāʾ*, in addition to the casting off of superficial boundaries and an emphasis on loving devotion over strict dogma, in his poetry that makes him a mystic. His poem *Bidrohi*, mentioned earlier, is a keen example of this. A few verses are offered here:

*Leaving behind the moon, the sun, the planets and the stars
Piercing through the earth and the heavens
Pushing through Almighty's sacred seat
Have I risen,
I, the perennial wonder of mother-earth!*

...

*I am creation, I am destruction,
I am habitation, I am the grave-yard,
I am the end, the end of night!
I am the son of Indrani
With the moon in my head
And the sun on my temple*

...

*Maddened with an intense joy I rush onward,
I am insane! I am insane!
Suddenly I have come to know myself,
All the false barriers have crumbled today!*⁵⁵

What may appear heretical in other Islamic contexts, in the context of the ecstatic devotee experiencing the Divine in a state of *fanāʾ*, these lines are entirely sensical. Despite never having joined a *tariqa* (Sufi order), Nazrul’s poetry portrays what some believe to be the height of Muslim mystical spiritual experience. Indeed, in a state in which there is One and none other, all else having fallen away, what else can there be but boundless Love?

⁵² Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 143. Elsewhere I have argued that one of the originators of the concept of *fanāʾ*, Abu Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī, may have further developed this concept as a product of Hindu-Muslim interchange. Please see: Rachelle Syed, “Vedānta in Muslim Dress: Revisited & Reimagined,” *Journal of Dharma Studies* 2 No. 1 (Spring 2019): 83–94. .

⁵³ Mahapatra, *The Folk Cults of Bengal*, no. 19:19–21.

⁵⁴ Mahapatra, no. 19:20.

⁵⁵ Muhammad Nurul Huda, “The Mystic in the Rebel,” International Center of Nazrul, accessed May 24, 2019, <https://www.icnazrul.com/articles-on-nazrul/120-the-mystic-in-the-rebel>; Nazrul Islam, “Bidrohi, The Rebel,” Poetry archive, trans. Kabir Chowdhury, Poemhunter.com, May 29, 2012, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-rebel-3/>. Please note that translations vary slightly.

Nazrul the Kālī Bhakta

Nazrul's comfort with Hinduism is often portrayed as part of his identity as a Bengali—and his use of Hindu vocabulary and imagery in his poetry as evidence of his “humanistic” political values. It is not untrue that Nazrul believed in a pluralism that he saw as the realization of Islam's true spirit, expressed in his poetry and activism; but to argue that Nazrul's affinity for Hindu imagery was simply a product of his context or a tool in turbulent times would be to tell only half the story. There is an ethos of love and the virtue of love as a path to God spread throughout Nazrul's work. This glows even more brightly when we consider that Bengal is also home to thriving *bhakti* traditions.

Aside from his Islamic poetry, Nazrul wrote over 500 poems using Hindu imagery. Over 400 of these poems were devoted to the love of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā⁵⁶, which speaks to experience with the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. He also wrote more than 150 songs and poems devoted to Kālī and Umā which while fewer in number than those written for Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, is where Nazrul ultimately rooted himself. In his youth, Nazrul's experiences in the *leto* group gave him a community, time with his uncle, and opportunity for artistic expression. It is also the first place he is documented as having been exposed to and became learned in the *purāṇas* including the *Devī Māhātmya*, canonical to Śakta traditions and bhakti in that region. Śaktī bhakti, bhakti devoted to the Great Goddess, often in Her manifestation as Kālī, in Bengal is theologically rooted in Śakta Tantra but also reflects common elements in Vaishnava bhakti and other folk traditions. The *Devī Māhātmya* is frequently the subject of plays and songs telling the stories of the Mother, and through his association with Bengali artistic groups Nazrul became deeply influenced by them. This can also be explored outside his poetry. In three personal letters, examined by Rachel Fell McDermott, Nazrul writes to Baradacaran Mujumdar addressing him as Śrī Śrī Caraṇārabindeṣu. In these letters, Nazrul “calls him the embodiment of Lord Śiva, begs for his *darśan*, and thanks him for his care of him in life after life.”⁵⁷ Mujumdar *initiated* Nazrul into Tantric ritual, was therefore his guru, and Nazrul practiced the worship of Kālī on the roof of his home. When he was taken from Kolkata to Dhaka, long after having lost his memory and ability to speak, his Kālī *mūrti* was left behind.⁵⁸ Clearly, Nazrul's relationship with his guru and personal rituals are not the actions of one who is merely expressing solidarity with his treasured neighbor.

To further explore Nazrul's Śakta bhakti let us return to his imprisonment by the British. June McDaniel identifies four primary strains of Śakta bhakti traditions: folk bhakti, emotional bhakti, political bhakti or Śakta nationalism, and universalist bhakti or Śakta Vedanta.⁵⁹ While not mutually exclusive or exhaustive, these categories provide a useful framework for contextualizing Nazrul's bhakti poetry. Written in 1922, the poem for which Nazrul was jailed is titled *The Arrival of the Goddess Durga*.⁶⁰ In it, McDaniel sees elements of the folk bhakti traditions, characterized by a bhakti that emphasizes the “wrathful goddess who has been neglected and who seeks revenge.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ McDermott, “A ‘Muslim’ Poet in the Lap of a ‘Hindu’ Mother” 287.

⁵⁷ McDermott, 288. That Nazrul refers to his guru this way is interesting, as Muslims generally understand their theology to hold that we live just one life after which a person is judged and enters either heaven or hell, in a very Judeo-Christian sense.

⁵⁸ McDermott, 288.

⁵⁹ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*, 145.

⁶⁰ Henceforth, *The Arrival*.

⁶¹ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*, 184.

However, there are also clear elements of “political bhakti” or Śakta nationalism, a bhakti that emerges in times of political stress. In her interviews, McDaniel’s informants frequently spoke of Nazrul as their favorite political bhakta given his rallying calls against occupation.⁶² This was not lost on the British, who saw Nazrul’s poem as a clear threat – a testament to its power.

*Our paradise has been conquered
By a tyrant, an evil monster.
The divine children are being whipped
Our young heroes are hanged daily
All India has become a slaughterhouse.*⁶³

In this brief sample, we are reminded that Nazrul was not a man of nonviolence. His cry for battle was not one of seeking religious conversion but one of resistance against the oppressor. This was very clear in his understanding of Islam, but the image he goes on to depict in this poem is not an Islamic one. Nazrul pleads, “Oh Goddess of catastrophe, why do you delay?...Who else but you can come to the battleground?”⁶⁴ In such lines, Nazrul is clearly recalling the battles of the *Devī Māhātmya* in which Mahādevī, in her form as Durga or Caṇḍika, slays the *asuras*⁶⁵ who have unseated the *devas*.⁶⁶ Here, Nazrul is invoking the Mother to return to the battlefield by equating the *asuras* of the epic with the British. The *Devī Suktom* of the *R̥g Veda* comprises the final verses of the *Devī Māhātmya*, and here praises Her victories against evil:

*Salutation be to you, O Nārāyaṇī, O you who in the form of Śivadātī slew the
mighty hosts of the daityas, O you of terrible form and loud throat!
Salutations be to you, O Nārāyaṇī, O you who have a face terrible with tusks
and are adored with a garland of heads, Cāmundā, O slayer of Muṇḍa.*⁶⁷

These verses sing the praises of the Devi who eradicates evil in order to restore *dharma*. While the imagery depicted elicits the image of a fearsome warrior, in the heart and mind of a bhakta or devotee, the image is of the fiercely protective Great Mother who protects her children. Nazrul’s poem is reminiscent of another verse from the *Devī Māhātmya*, extolling the Mother’s role as protector:

*Salutations be to you, O Nārāyaṇī, O you who are intent on saving the dejected
and distressed that take refuge under you. O you, Devī, who remove the
sufferings of all.*⁶⁸

In *The Arrival*, Nazrul writes “the divine children are being whipped,” to indicate that the children are under attack, as the *devas* were in the *Devī Māhātmya*, and require Her assistance as

⁶² McDaniel, 183.

⁶³ McDaniel, 184.

⁶⁴ McDaniel, 184.

⁶⁵ *Asura* is commonly interpreted as “demon” but it is more apt to understand them as a class of beings that exist in opposition to the *devas* and *devīs*, and that represent the lesser or negative qualities of humanity, such as egotism.

⁶⁶ This is a gross oversimplification of an important and meaningful sacred text, given as such in consideration of the space allowed by this paper.

⁶⁷ Jagadīśvarānanda Sarasvatī, *DevīMāhātmya: Glory of the Divine Mother : 700 Mantras on Sri Durga* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2003), 141.

⁶⁸ Jagadīśvarānanda Sarasvatī, 138.

they did. However, the *Devī Māhātmya* is an esoteric text, with each element of the story representing an element of Śākta theology. The bloody battle is interpreted metaphorically, referring to the battle each person fights within themselves against egotism and excess.⁶⁹ In this poem, however, Nazrul calls to the Mother quite literally, expressing his frustration with the nonviolent movement and suffering at the hands of the British. Such poetry often is believed to be evidence of Nazrul's deft use of Hindu imagery in the pursuit of Indian independence, however, it should be noted that Nazrul is not speaking to all of India, or even Bengal—the poem is directly addressed to the Divine Mother in the style of a plea, or perhaps more explicitly, a *prayer*.

The insistence that Nazrul's use of Śākta imagery is purely motivated by the pursuit of Indian independence ignores the emotional intensity and sincerity of Nazrul's poetry and seems to treat his art as almost utilitarian. Most importantly, examined with the knowledge that Nazrul had been initiated into tantric ritual, it is hardly reasonable to perceive *The Arrival* as solely a tool of political motivation. For writing and publishing it, Nazrul was jailed for a year, one month of which he spent on a hunger strike.

Above, several names are used to refer to the Mahadevī, such as *Cāmuṇḍā* and *Śivadātī*. This is because while it appears there are multiple *devīs* in the *Devī Māhātmya*, they are all manifestations of the Mahadevī, referred to by bhaktas as simple “Mother” or “Ma,” the Great Devī who is identical with *Brahman*. At times they are represented by Durga, the primary figure of the *Devī Māhātmya*, yet the “Queen of the Tantras” is Kālī, who emanates from Durga's head to drink the falling droplets of blood from which the *asura* Raktabīja continues to regenerate himself. Durga and Kālī are identical, and though they play different roles in the text, they are both Mahadevī whose nature is *Brahman*. Kālī's iconography makes Her an apt symbol for Nazrul's revolutionary cause,⁷⁰ but his spiritual connection to the imagery he employed is found again in the ways he sought *refuge* in Kālī.

It is easy to forget that the vitality and bravery of Nazrul's adherence to his values came at a price. He struggled with communities on all sides, even from other Muslims who sometimes wished for the punishment of God to rain down upon him.⁷¹ Nazrul's weariness with these sectarian conflicts comes through in his bhaktic poetry. Aside from his political and social struggles, he endured his share of suffering: the death of his father as a child which caused him to grow up responsible for an impoverished family; the death of one of his children; the mysterious illness of his wife; his own struggles with finances, safety, and well-being throughout his life. As a poet, Nazrul did not receive patronage. For him, debt became both a literal reality and a spiritual metaphor. In one poem translated by Rachel McDermott, Nazrul says:

*Oh Mā, whatever suffering, scarcity, and debt I have
I've placed it all at your feet.
Repay now Ma, all your devotee's debts.*⁷²

⁶⁹ This paradigm would have been familiar to Nazrul and other Muslims who might have recognized it as similar to the “greater jihad” wherein one's greatest challenge in life is not others, but one's own lower tendencies.

⁷⁰ McDermott, “A ‘Muslim’ Poet in the Lap of a ‘Hindu’ Mother,” 291.

⁷¹ Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 206–7.

⁷² McDermott, “A ‘Muslim’ Poet in the Lap of a ‘Hindu’ Mother,” 293.

Nazrul goes on to express his submission to “Mā,”⁷³ saying: “I no longer belong to myself, but am already offered at your feet.”⁷⁴ Overburdened with life’s suffering, in this case debt, Nazrul lays himself at Her feet, refers to himself as one of Her children, and employs Her to “come and grab me” thereby protecting him from his creditors.⁷⁵ Indeed, the sentiment expressed is appropriate from the perspective of what McDaniel calls Emotional Śākta bhakti, discussed further below, wherein the bhakta is as a child in the lap of the Mother. Elsewhere, like his predecessor Rāmprasād Sen, Nazrul continues to portray himself as defenseless, frightened, and vulnerable.

*O Ma, at night overcome with sleep, I always see you in my heart,
As if your image, like a mother, is embracing me.*⁷⁶

The vulnerability expressed in this poem is reminiscent of a child waking in the night, searching for the protection and comfort of a mother filled with empathy and care for her child. It is also interesting that in the full poem, Nazrul refers to seeing Mahadevī in his heart twice, “If I close my eyes, I see your image in my heart.”⁷⁷ The “image of the heart” appears to be emphasized, and may certainly speak to an emotional connection and sense of devotion, but in the context of Śākta tantra the “heart” sometimes refers to the *madhyadhāman*, the central abode of Mahadevī in the body, where the bhakta may experience mystical states through the body.⁷⁸ Nazrul’s heart imagery may also be a reference to the *anāhata*, heart lotus, or the *ānanda-kanda* directly beneath it, wherein devotees install an image of their chosen deva/devī for the purpose of adoration and meditation.⁷⁹ The intimate nature of this poem harkens back to McDaniel’s categories of bhakti, specifically “emotional bhakti.” Emotional Śākta bhakti is less interested in material gain or a tit-for-tat relationship with Śaktī, in any of Her forms. Instead, the relationship cultivated is extremely personal, even private, with its primary goal being the reunion of Śaktī/Mother and bhakta/child.⁸⁰ McDaniel sees this in the *sānta bhava*, a “union of shared awareness” or “united consciousness” but perhaps greater is *mahābhava*, a term taken from Bengali Vaiṣṇavism that in a Śākta context refers to the ultimate state of devotion to the Mother wherein one attains Union.⁸¹ With his waking eyes, Nazrul also sees Mahadevī, likely in one of her *saguṇa* forms,⁸² in his own reflection, perhaps in reference to Śākta tantra’s nondualistic ontology. Indeed, the ultimate aim of *sadhana*, praxis, in Śākta theology is the realization of oneself as *Brahman*. Finally, this poem ends

⁷³ Śakti bhaktas routinely refer to Mahadevī as “Mā” or Mother, which may refer to any of her forms as this term speaks to the devotional relationship found in Śākta bhakti wherein the relationship is envisioned as a mother-child relationship.

⁷⁴ McDermott, “A ‘Muslim’ Poet in the Lap of a ‘Hindu’ Mother: Kazi Nazrul Islam and the Goddess Kālī,” 293.

⁷⁵ McDermott, 293.

⁷⁶ McDermott, 292.

⁷⁷ McDermott, 292.

⁷⁸ André Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World: An Overview* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 74–75.

⁷⁹ Rachel Fell McDermott, *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kālī and Umā from Bengal* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 103.

⁸⁰ Ramprasād Sen is generally credited with the development of a style of bhaktic hymn to Kali known as Śākta *padavali*, and he was closely followed by his later contemporary, Kamalakantha Bhattacharya. But lesser known poet-mystics continued the tradition and are responsible for its survival through the colonial era and beyond. These include: Nabai Mayra (Kabiwala), Dewan Raghunath, Kali Mirza, Kabiyal Ram Basu, Dasharathi Ray and Girish Chandra Ghosh. Kazi Nazrul Islam is another notable composer in this genre. See: Sanghamitra Saha, *A Handbook of West Bengal*, vol. 2 (International School of Dravidian Linguistics, 1998), 604.

⁸¹ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*, 158.

⁸² Such as Durga or Kālī. While they appear multiple, the *saguṇa* (with qualities) form refers to a tangible form representing a specific aspect of the formless Absolute, *nirguṇa brahman* (without qualities). c

with a longing, heartfelt query into when Nazrul will be taken into the lap of the Mother, a phrase which appears elsewhere in Nazrul's poetry:

*Why fear this place
When you'll sleep peacefully at the Mother's feet?
Who dies ignited by the flames of this world,
to him the Mother calls: "Come to My lap; come to My lap."
To lull you to sleep, Oh Wearied by Life,
Mā takes you to Her lap
disguised as Death.⁸³*

It must be remembered that Nazrul's *iṣṭa-devata* was Kālī, who in Śākta theology teaches about nature, change, and ultimately, death.

Kālī is the "Queen of the Tantras" because she obliterates the dualities that, in tantric theology, thwart the realization of the true Self. Purity and impurity are one of those dualities, which Kālī destroys by dancing naked in the cremation ground. While there is not space to fully do justice to Kālī's theology here, the cremation ground is of particular importance because it speaks to Kālī's relationship to death. Kālī's outer aspect is simply "nature," sometimes interpreted as *prakṛti*. "The mad Goddess is now wild, unpredictable, and capricious *nature*, the 'storm-cloud' that can cause floods (by her presence) or famine (by her absence). Her frenzied dance is the eternal change of the natural order. Her terrifying form is a pictorial expression of the brutal fact that everything in nature is constantly changing—and change is really decay and finally death."⁸⁴ Thus, Kālī teaches that death is a part of life and that to show disdain towards death, despite the pain that comes with it, is to show disdain for life. By being closer to Kālī, one can learn to accept and find comfort with death by way of "liberative fearlessness," a state of fearlessness regarding mortality, and/or "transcendent liberation," or to understand that while the body may die, the Self is deathless.⁸⁵

Finally, it can be said that Kālī speaks especially to those at the margins. Kālī's eliminating of prohibitive boundaries speaks to a sense of empowerment for those who are otherwise outcast, marginalized, or oppressed. For Nazrul that could refer to people like himself, women, the poor and struggling, and certainly India at the time. This is consistent with the approach of the bhakta, as bhaktic praxis emphasizes a loving, personal connection present in both Nazrul's Hindu and Islamic poetry. What is necessary for bhakti, including Kālī bhakti, is the submission of the bhakta and the elevation of a path of loving devotion. Kālī bhaktas may intentionally cast-off outer identities in order to intentionally bring themselves into a state of greater submission before Mahadevī. Ramprasad Sen, for example, by portraying himself as a woman in some of his poetry intentionally sheds his maleness, as being male in his context automatically entitles him to greater power, and therefore would prevent true bhakti.⁸⁶ By identifying with Kali a bhakta identifies with

⁸³ Nazrul Islam, "Syama Wakes On The Cremation Grounds," Poetry archive, Poemhunter.com, March 13, 2012, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/syama-wakes-on-the-cremation-grounds/>.

⁸⁴ Vrinda Dalmiya, "Loving Paradoxes: A Feminist Reclamation of the Goddess Kali," *Hypatia* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 134.

⁸⁵ Dalmiya, 139.

⁸⁶ Dalmiya, 137.

the marginalized and generally forbidden, and perhaps finds them “spiritually refreshing.”⁸⁷ This is once again reflected in Nazrul’s belief that Kali is *not just* a Goddess belonging to the Hindus, but is the Mother of all her children. “[In] Nazrul’s voice she is made the mother of all children – the weak, the servants, the sick, the starving, the laborer—even the Caṇḍāla, or outcaste, and children (perhaps Muslims, like him?) who fall beyond the category of normative *dharma*.⁸⁸ Such a position is not always obvious in his poetry addressed specifically to Kali, but one example can be found in his poem entitled *Prostitute*.

*Who calls you a prostitute, mother?
Who spits at you?
Perhaps you were suckled by someone
as chaste as Seeta.
You may not be chaste,
yet you are one of the family
of all our mothers and sisters.
Your sons are like any of us sons,
as capable of achieving fame and honor
as any of us,
as capable of entering heaven.⁸⁹*

This poem is taken to be an example of Nazrul’s Muslimness,⁹⁰ and sits comfortably alongside other poetry in which Nazrul expresses a desire or belief to see women rise up, such as his poem *Rise Up Women – Rise Up Like the Flaming Fire* in which he says, “O Women the ever-victorious, awaken in you the goddess Durga!”⁹¹

Nevertheless, from a Śākta perspective, *Prostitute* rings loudly with tantric undertones. In tantric ritual a human woman may be venerated as a manifestation of the Mahadevī; a woman of lower social standing or a prostitute is required to foreground the belief that the idea of inherent purity and impurity are illusions created by human beings that obscure the truth of Reality—that *all* is the Mother.⁹² In this poem, Nazrul appears to be speaking to women in general, not the Mahadevī, and the unfair burden of chastity put upon women that is not always equally put upon men, another issue that Nazrul concerned himself with. From a Śākta perspective, the poem refers to the inherent divinity of women regardless of the burdens placed upon them by patriarchal societies.

⁸⁷ David R. Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahāvidyās* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 259.

⁸⁸ McDermott, “A ‘Muslim’ Poet in the Lap of a ‘Hindu’ Mother,” 293.

⁸⁹ Nazrul Islam, “Prostitute,” Poetry archive, trans. Sajed Kamal, Poemhunter.com, May 29, 2012, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/prostitute-8/>.

⁹⁰ Nitu and Khan, “Treatment of Religiousness in Kazi Nazrul Islam,” 22.

⁹¹ Nazrul Islam, “Rise Up, Women - Rise Up Like The Flaming Fire,” Poetry archive, trans. Sajed Kamal, Poemhunter.com, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/rise-up-women-rise-up-like-the-flaming-fire/>.

⁹² Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, 246.

Building Bridges with the Rebel Poet of Bengal

Nazrul's life shows us that even when his faith evolved in conversation with his pluralistic context, he remained a person of honest devotion. In Bangladeshi scholarship, Nazrul has been largely remembered as a Muslim fighting for the true spirit of Islam in his political activism and his poetry. Much of this literature remembers him as a humanistic politician whose love for his Hindu neighbors demonstrated his piety, and so he generously employed Hindu imagery and vocabulary in his work in what seemed an effort to bring them to the unifying table. Nazrul might indeed be called a humanist, but I believe this would be a glossing over of his relationship with Hinduism, specifically Kālī bhakti. By referring to him only as a humanist, much like referring to him only as a mystic, interested parties can find a way around having to see Nazrul's wholly complex faith-identity, one which he constructs for himself.

Nazrul was raised as a Muslim, took up his Muslim father's duties, and incorporated his Muslim identity into his poetry and music; Nazrul was also initiated into tantric ritual, had a long-standing relationship with his guru, performed tantric rituals in his home with his personal *mūrti*, and displayed the love, submission, seeking refuge, and desire of the bhakta, especially in his poetry to Kālī. This goes well beyond simply "loving thy neighbor." Nazrul was not just a Muslim and not just a Hindu. He was Bengali and saw lines of division as the tool of the occupier. In much of his poetry, he calls upon the people of Bengal to remember the ways in which they were a unified community. He embodied this history, especially as a poet and musician. Nazrul saw the fight for freedom as an act of love and justice, which reminds us again of the battles of in the *Devī Māhātmya* and Islamic history. It also speaks to Kālī's deeper theology, as what appears to be terrifying is, to the bhakta, protective, loving, and liberating.

Nazrul's spiritual journey sits among other notable figures from Bengal, perhaps especially the fifteenth-century poet Kabir. Although we cannot delve deeply into it here, some aspects of Kabir's fascinating life seem to lay a foundation for the later arrival of Nazrul. Stories as to Kabir's origins are many, sometimes featuring him as the child of Muslim parents or as a child found abandoned. Kabir's poetry would go on to leave its mark in multiple spheres of religious, spiritual, and artistic life.⁹³ Like Nazrul, Kabir is believed to have been initiated into bhaktic praxis by his guru, Rāmānanda, who initially refused. While there may be various tellings of this story, one version explains Rāmānanda is believed to have first turned Kabir away due to his Muslim background. Unrelenting, Kabir knew Rāmānanda went to the Ganges each morning in the pre-dawn hours. Kabir laid upon the steps, allowing Rāmānanda to accidentally step on him and explain "Rama!" to which Kabir replied, "You spoke the name of God in my presence! You initiated me. I'm your student!"⁹⁴

Regardless of any religious affiliation, Kabir was heavily critical of both Muslims and Hindus, especially what he saw as spiritual passivity. For example, Kabir was heavily critical of animal sacrifice as it occurs in both Hinduism and Islam and argued that no ritual or prayer could

⁹³ "Kabir," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, January 1, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kabir-Indian-mystic-and-poet>.

⁹⁴ Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, trans. Linda Hess and Śukadeva Siṃha (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Robert Bly and Kabir, *Kabir: Ecstatic Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), ix-x.

make up for such an act.⁹⁵ Nazrul’s criticisms of “tikism and beardism” amongst Hindus and Muslims seems to echo Kabir’s criticisms, and further comparative study of these two figures may reveal some valuable insights into how we understand spiritual devotion overall. The details of Kabir’s life are unclear, and his works demonstrate that his primary concern was not necessarily Hindu and Muslim unity, but the transcending of both traditions towards true unity in the form of Ultimate Truth. In this way, Kabir may be thought of being “both” and “none.” Perhaps inspired by Kabir but concerned for the challenges of nineteenth-century India generally and Bengal in particular, Nazrul chose to embody both traditions.

Whereas a religiously and spiritually pluralistic identity may not have been acceptable to others, on the basis of either politics or theology,⁹⁶ it remained Nazrul’s right to determine his own religious identity. What remains interesting about Nazrul is that while there was a degree of intermingling between traditions that characterizes the Bengali context, he did not claim to have reached a truth beyond religion or intellectual pursuit. In other words, he did not attempt to erase distinctive identities or claim a total transcendence of religion. It is important to reflect on this point while bearing in mind the political context Nazrul occupied. Significantly, Nazrul did not attempt to create an amalgamated religion or spirituality. He did not call for a new religion or for the setting aside of religion in favor of a purely esoteric or secular experience. “He writes, ‘my *mantra* is [a famous verse from the Qur’an]: *It is You Alone we worship, and You Alone we ask for help.*”⁹⁷

It is Nazrul’s generous love, his mysticism and his bhakti, that within him creates a bridge. In order to achieve unity these differences must be intentionally engaged, as to simply transcend them is to perhaps achieve an overarching spiritual unity but not necessarily a social one, which requires the opportunity to learn from difference.

A Theological Reflection on Bridges

This essay does not attempt a strictly theological argument in favor of Nazrul’s belonging to either Islam or Hinduism. Rather, it explores Nazrul’s complex spirituality through his life and work, which while not necessarily theological in and of itself, offers the opportunity to examine such complexity through the lenses of various traditions in an effort to deepen our understanding of faith, the power of art to transmit spirituality, and the theological evolution brought about by dialogue and interchange. The metaphor of a bridge lends an illustrative hand to the unique spirituality of Nazrul Islam, and I believe, does justice to the mission for unity that he undertook. First, we must ask, can a bridge exist without being secured from both sides, as Nazrul seemed to be? McDermott observes that Nazrul could be revered for his accomplishments but was unable to blaze a new trail because he used symbols Muslims didn’t share.⁹⁸ However, in the paradigm of a

⁹⁵ David N. Lorenzen, “Religious Identity in Gorakhnath and Kabir: Hindus, Muslims, Yogis, and Sants,” in *Yogi Heroes and Poets: Histories and Legends of the Naths*, ed. Adrián Muñoz and David N. Lorenzen (New Delhi: Dev, 2012), 27–29.

⁹⁶ By this, I mean to acknowledge that for many Muslims the fact that Nazrul received initiation from a Hindu teacher signifies that he was no longer Muslim and therefore he did not have a pluralistic religious identity. However, this paper does not attempt to reconcile Islamic or Hindu theology or philosophy with Nazrul’s self-identification. Rather, it is an exploration of Nazrul’s spirituality as he presented it in his poetry and life, regardless of how that may be perceived through the lens of a particular doctrine.

⁹⁷ McDermott, “A ‘Muslim’ Poet in the Lap of a ‘Hindu’ Mother,” 295.

⁹⁸ McDermott, 297.

bridge, wherein one may not be entirely one or the other (or, be entirely both according to one's own self-identification) total agreement is not necessary for meaningful engagement. Bridges might be thought of as structures that close wounds to create an amalgamated whole, but in this case, it is more appropriate to imagine a bridge as a means of connection between two spaces that allows for communication and interchange yet allows for uniqueness and particularity. The bridge that is Nazrul has some thought-provoking construction features. It is firmly rooted in two sides that from his perspective, as one "in between," may be thought of as two halves of the whole that was him. Theology might be defined as the underlying structure for spiritual experience in a given context, and that is certainly one part of Nazrul's bridge, but more importantly it is love that forms and sustains it. Love for the One, and love for the human beings on either side and the land and history they share, even when not harmonious. From a theological perspective, such an example offers valuable insight into both Islamic mysticism and, here, Śākta bhakti. Also plainly evident is that while love and devotion are key to both Islamic mysticism and bhakti, these two cannot be recklessly conflated. To Nazrul they may have been complimentary as he allowed them to remain distinct, perhaps except in his pure devotion, in the same way that he saw the people of Bengal as both distinct and united.

Nazrul and those like him offer an important opportunity for theologians to explore, and perhaps experience, something that doesn't always exist as a sacred text or treatise. The difference lies in the way in which Nazrul is remembered. When his "both-ness" is recalled it is often in the context of an attempt to claim him as either Muslim or Hindu political activist or to label him a dangerous heretic. But a close theological reflection on the ways in which his spirituality, mysticism, and bhakti formed him suggests that he was not a heretic, but a gift.

Potential for Further Research

The lives and works of Nazrul and those like him offer an interesting opportunity for theologians and social activists, but also for scholars in modern comparative and dialogical religious movements. The work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Arvind Sharma, Francis Clooney, and others seeks to find ways to foster communication, interchange, and constructive thought as a product of interfaith dialogue, comparative theology, and comparative religion. Great opportunity exists in the examination of Nazrul's spiritual expression, which might be thought of as an exercise in the true "big-ness" of the Divine, and similar stories both past and present, that can further our understanding of philosophy such as Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" and Clooney's "crossing over and coming back." In the emerging field of dialogical theology, Nazrul's life offers a perspective that combines theological, social, and political realities in relation to post-colonialism and globalization. Potential exists for these philosophies and approaches to be deepened and expanded, in a way reclaiming previously ignored or forgotten history (such as Nazrul's) and offers insight into how theology and religion intersect with freedom movements and globalization today.

Nazrul's gift was his bridge, a way for people to cross over, cultivate empathy, unity, share knowledge, and remain distinct in their particularities. Through Nazrul, as one of many examples, we can learn about what these kinds of "bridges" are made of, what they can do, and therefore chart exciting new theological opportunities as well as the potential to bring communities together for a common goal. It was the division of the Bengali community that Nazrul was working against, and often it was the demand for exclusivity that thwarted the fight for freedom. We will never know how Nazrul felt about being moved to Dhaka late in life, or if he was even aware of it. His mission

is over, but his legacy offers to hand off the baton in the last stanza of *Bidrohi* and we may again remember Tagore’s words, “Come, O Comet. Build a bridge of fire across darkness.”

*Weary of struggles, I, the great rebel,
Shall rest in quiet only when I find
The sky and the air free of the piteous groans of the oppressed.
Only when the battle fields are cleared of jingling bloody sabers
Shall I, weary of struggles, rest in quiet,
I am the rebel eternal,
I raise my head beyond this world and,
High, ever erect and alone.⁹⁹*



Rachelle E. Syed is a doctoral student at the Graduate Theological Union in the Mira & Ajay Shingal Center for Dharma Studies. Rachelle earned her B.A. in sociology with minors in religious studies and anthropology from the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point, an M.A. in Islamic Studies and Muslim-Christian Relations and a graduate certificate from the Women’s Leadership Institute at Hartford Seminary, and currently studies at the GTU, as a scholar-practitioner of the Śākti Bhakti tradition, where she focuses on the cultivation of a whole-hearted Śākta eco-praxis. Currently, Rachelle is a fellow of the Koret Fellowship in Interreligious Dialogue and the curator of Drawing the Soul Towards Truth: Hindu & Muslim Sacred Geometry, a project of aesthetics as the impetus for interreligious dialogue. Her research interests include interreligious studies and dialogue, Hindu-Muslim interchange, ecotheology and the intersection of sustainability and religion, and Hindu theology and philosophy

The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles published by the *Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS)* are the authors’ own and do not reflect or represent those of the *JIRS* staff, the *JIRS* Board of Advisors, or *JIRS* publishing partners.

⁹⁹ Kazi Nazrul Islam, *Poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam in English Translation*, ed. Muhammad Nurul Huda (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Nazrul Institute, 1997), 16; Islam, “Bidrohi, The Rebel.”