Nazrul's Gift: Illustrating the Promise of the Third Space in the Aesthetic Dialogue of Nazrul Islam

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Abstract

In this paper, I illustrate the power and potential of the third space through the poetry of Nazrul Islam in order to articulate what I argue to be Nazrul's true legacy: the genuine potential of liminality in the discovery and embracing of difference. In doing so, I seek to clarify Nazrul's gift as one that offers us the opportunity to examine the ways in which we attach power and privilege to difference and, finally, reflect on the ways in which aesthetics, liminality, and dialogue are necessary for the flourishing of our world. This paper then constitutes a contribution to the interdisciplinary project of aesthetic interreligious dialogue in that it illustrates the kinds of transformation that may be experienced in the liminal spaces those dialogues create. Through Nazrul, we have an opportunity to imagine what impact these dialogues can have on the dialoging individuals and their respective contexts, especially in relation to shared problems such as war and climate change.[1]

Keywords

Nazrul Islam, Third Space, aesthetics, interreligious, dialogue, poet, Muslim, Hindu

On the 112th birthday of Kazi Nazrul Islam (d. 1976), the National Poet of Bangladesh, the Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue of the Department of World Religions and Culture of Dhaka University held a conference entitled "Kazi Nazrul Islam and Interfaith Harmony." In the keynote address Professor Kazi Nurul Islam "urged the United Nations to

[1] This work is indebted to Dr. Gulshan Ara Kazi and Mr. Kazi Belal of the International Center of Nazrul, and Dr. Mustofa Munir for their generous help and feedback throughout this project and others. Their dedication the preserving the memory of Nazrul Islam and sharing his legacy continues to inspire far beyond the borders of any faith or nation.

declare Kazi Nazrul Islam's birthday (May 25) the Universal Interfaith Harmony Day."[2] Born at the tail end of Britain's occupation of India, Nazrul's world was filled and formed by a diverse tapestry of art, music, and spirituality that, within him, cultivated a perspective that saw the emancipation of India as one free of all forms of oppression, including religious bigotry or any claims to cultural superiority amongst India's diverse peoples. In his poetry, Nazrul wove together themes of anti-authoritarianism, love of land and heritage, and spiritual devotion that continually resisted the expectations and boundaries of others. For example, in *Jagore Tarun Dal* (*O the young ones, wake up!*) translated by Dr. Gulshan Ara Kazi, Nazrul writes: "Preach the spirit of humanity above religion, color and race…"[3] And in his poem "I sing of equality," Nazrul says, "Above the caste, doctrine, religion—a human being is supreme and nobler! There is no dissimilarity."[4] Likewise, in *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, Priti Kumar Mitra writes of Nazrul: "He aimed at a complete blend of culture, society, and blood between the two communities and attempted to exemplify the grand vision in his own life. Rejecting the outward paraphernalia…of religion, Nazrul emphasized universals in them both and also the complementary elements to unite the Hindus and Muslims as humans and Indians/Bengalis."[5]

When we consider Nazrul writing within the context of the Indian independence movement, his use of language and imagery that calls for a "rising above" difference makes reasonable sense. Yet, I argue that this approach does not truly reflect the most important elements of Nazrul's legacy, which have otherwise been largely overlooked. This legacy becomes clearer when Nazrul's work is examined through the lens of the third space found in interreligious aesthetics. In my earlier paper "'Come, O Comet! Build a Bridge of Fire Across Darkness!': A Theological Reflection on the Bhakti-Mysticism of Kazi Nazrul Islam," I argued that Nazrul's personal experiences and the way he lived his faith depict a sort of dual-spirituality wherein it may be argued that Nazrul saw himself as both a Muslim and a Hindu.[6] Using the metaphor of a bridge, I argued that the aforementioned gift may be found in the full experience of liminality, allowing for "a way for people to cross over, cultivate empathy, unity, share knowledge, and remain distinct in their particularities."[7] Nazrul may therefore be imagined as an embodiment of this third space, clearly depicted through his resistance to all forms of oppressive power. A focus on transcendence, however, tends to portray Nazrul's legacy as one in which difference may be thought of as the problem and calls for unity the solution, but this stance tends to ignore the fact that Nazrul is reputed to have resisted attempts to amalgamate the traditions of which he was a part, or any others in India. What remains is an inconsistent approach to difference that I suggest obscures the true heart of Nazrul's legacy, his "gift," which when uncovered reveals an important opportunity to carefully reflect on the way we think and speak about difference. In this paper, I illustrate the power and potential of the third space through the poetry of Nazrul Islam in order to articulate what I argue to be Nazrul's true legacy: the genuine

[2] Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam, "Dhaka Interfaith Forum: Kazi Nazrul Islam and Interfaith Harmony," Universal Peach Federation, May 25, 2011, https://archive.upf.org/interfaith-programs/3776-seminar-on-kazi-nazrul-islam-and-interfaith-harmony (accessed February 26, 2024).
[3] Nazrul Islam and Gulshan Ara Kazi, *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Life and Lyric* (Dhaka: Nazrul Institute, 2013), 176.
[4] 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): 22.
[5] Priti Kumar Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam: Poetry and History*, Oxford India Paperbacks (New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 197–98.
[6] Rachelle Syed, "Come, O Comet! Build a Bridge of Fire Across Darkness!: A Theological Reflection on the Bhakti-Mysticism of Kazi Nazrul Islam," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 31 (November 2020).
[7] Syed, 90.

potential of liminality in the discovery and embracing of difference. In doing so, I seek to clarify Nazrul's gift as one that offers us the opportunity to examine the ways in which we attach power and privilege to difference and, finally, reflect on the ways in which aesthetics, liminality, and dialogue are necessary for the flourishing of our world. This paper then constitutes a contribution to the interdisciplinary project of aesthetic interreligious dialogue in that it illustrates the kinds of transformation that may be experienced in the liminal spaces those dialogues create. Through Nazrul, we have an opportunity to imagine what impact these dialogues can have on the dialoging individuals and their respective contexts, especially in relation to shared problems such as war and climate change.

Aesthetic Dialogue and the Third Space

Before moving forward, it is first helpful briefly to review the role of aesthetics and the third space in interreligious dialogue. Leonard Swidler, Founder and President of the Dialogue Institute and Professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University, defines interreligious dialogue as: "...to learn something about the ultimate meaning of life that they did not know solely from their own religious perspective."[8] Such dialogues are generally found to engage primarily textual and linguistic means, often between religious or spiritual leaders on behalf of a community; but Swidler (and many others) acknowledge that language carries with it inherent limitations as language can only be a partial representation of an individual's reality or perspective.[9] For this reason, Swidler came to define "dialogue of the heart" wherein we "open ourselves to receive the beauty of 'the Other.'"[10]

In the "Dialogue of the Heart" we open ourselves to receive the beauty of "the other." Because we humans are body and spirit, or, rather, body-spirit, we give bodily expression in all the arts to our multifarious responses to life: joy, sorrow, gratitude, anger, and, most of all, love. We try to express our inner feelings, which grasp reality in far deeper and higher ways than we are able to put into rational concepts and words; hence, we create poetry, music, dance, painting, architecture—the expressions of the heart. All the world delights in beauty, and so it is here that we find the easiest encounter with "the other," the simplest door to dialogue.[11]

We may be first inclined to inquire what is meant by "easy" here. On one hand, this statement makes little sense when we consider the extremely diverse ways in which human beings experience the world and feel or express emotions, and so the idea of it being easy suggests some kind of flattening tendency that ignores this diversity. However, I suggest that Swidler is referring to the ways in which aesthetics, including the expression of any emotion, allows for a freer and

[8] Leonard J. Swidler, "The History of Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), 14. The terms "interreligious" and "interfaith" are often used interchangeably in dialogue. Here, "interreligious" is used to refer to dialogue between, among, and within diverse faith traditions, including those that do not accept the term "religion" or are unsystematized. For more on this, I recommend: Christopher Evan Longhurst, "Interreligious Dialogue? Interfaith Relations? Or, Perhaps Some Other Term?" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 55, no. 1 (2020): 117–124

[9] Swidler, 12.

[10] Leonard J. Swidler, *Dialogue for Interreligious Study: Strategies for the Transformation of Culture-Shaping Institutions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 10.

[11] Swidler (2014), 10.

less (if at all) controlled means by which to access the perspective of another. While doctrine may be regulated by an authority figure, how one depicts their own experience of faith through an aesthetic medium such as poetry, visual art, dance, or ritual is often far less regulated. Switching a dialogue from a primarily theological and linguistic modality to an aesthetic one means that we move from "using language about religious traditions, their similarities and differences, to highlighting the performances, material objects, and sensual dimensions of differing traditions as they are enacted through food, architectural design, music, images, poetry, the arts, smells, and bodily interactions."[12] There is consequently no separating one's body from the dialogue when aesthetics are the medium, since this union constitutes a "laboratory within which we can better understand the impact of the physical world on human sense perceptions."[13] In other words, aesthetics brings with it a fuller understanding of the ways in which our contexts impact our spirituality, and vice versa, allowing for the realization that theological objectivity is an unusual notion that seems to seek a separation between idea and the brain from which it came. Through aesthetics, we have the opportunity to explore the ways in which experiences like war, climate change, independence movements, and our very bodies and the spaces they occupy shape and are shaped by our beliefs.

The arts create opportunities, often in an egalitarian fashion, that are not always available in interreligious dialogue facilitated by religious leaders through language.[14]

> As the visible and yet wordless other, art offers to inter-religious dialogue a vocabulary and practice of the interstitial, the ambivalent, the hybrid, the sensible, and the liminal, advancing a positive discussion of differences as the progenitor, and vivifying agent, of dialogue. In its material grammar alone, art presents interreligious dialogue with visual, sensory, poetic, aural, and performed instances of meaning-relations established through and across formal, perceptual, and conceptual differences, without erasing, appropriating, or rejecting the other.[15]

Here, Mary Anderson is describing the ways in which aesthetics offers us an opportunity to experience difference without fear or thoughts of scarcity, such as may be found in claims to spiritual exclusivity, because aesthetics allows and protects difference by which we may come to know ourselves in relation to Others. The overall goal here is therefore not simply clarifying similarities and differences, but the safe experience of difference as the stimulus to imagination and insight, which can be shared by diverse members of such a dialogue. This is so in part because "the arts work from and trigger the imagination, fostering new ways of seeing, hearing and touching, forming aesthetic connections between communities of bodies in time and spaces."[16]

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[12] S. Brent Plate, "Interreligious Aesthetics: From Dialogue to the Senses," *Cross Currents* 68, no. 3 (2018): 330.
[13] Plate, 332.
[14] This is a reference specifically to "theological talk," or talking about a religion or spiritual tradition using tradition-approved language and methods, such as debate, and not a reference to aesthetic venues that happen to use language, such as storytelling and poetry as these require a greater understanding of embodiment and participation.
[15] Mary Anderson, "Art and Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. C. Cornille (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), 102.
[16] Plate, "Interreligious Aesthetics: From Dialogue to the Senses," 332.

Put another way, aesthetic dialogue is less about examining the ways in which religious traditions are similar or different and more about the ways in which people of different religious and spiritual traditions (or none) explore each other's worldview, facilitated through embodied experience, in an open-ended way that resists hegemony. Here, there can be no separation between a religion or tradition and the people or culture from which it is born because there is a centralized awareness that all human activity, including thought, is an embodied experience. The arts engage us not just as thinking, rational beings but as *feeling* beings as well, our spirituality reflecting our complexity as whole human beings experiencing life through a particular lens.

This is further emphasized by Ruth Illman, a leading scholar of aesthetics and dialogue, who explains that dialogue is not just about two people having a conversation, but "dialogue can be better understood as a complex web of interaction and interpretation, self-reflexion and encounters, a 'multi-layered relationality.'"[17] In such an interaction, or indeed, a relationship, aesthetic dialogue is about the furthering of human creativity, which in turn requires a critical awareness of whatever might hinder or prevent such a relationship, such as claims to cultural superiority or religious exclusivity. "At the level of spiritual experience, dialogue not only creates authentic bonds and engagement among its participants—the fruitful outcome of a genuine hospitality between the other and the self—it also becomes, in the course of this engagement, an intimate agent of creation, generating within its participants subliminal, incremental, and even sudden changes in awareness of self, other and the world."[18] Approached this way, aesthetic dialogue may be imagined as akin to an awakening of connectivity, a relationality among and between human beings that requires us to critically revisit many of the assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and structures we associate with ourselves and our spirituality. Such an experience cannot require or even allow the flattening away of difference, as it is through difference such interactions are possible. As will be explored further below, this point is key for understanding the true potential of Nazrul's legacy, as the awakening spurred by such engagement often runs contrary to attempts to simplify, standardize, systematize, or codify a particular religious or spiritual worldview. What must be called into question here is not difference, but the ways in which we encounter and process difference, which is best illustrated through the liminal quality, the third space of aesthetic dialogue.

The Third Space

In his 2004 work entitled *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha introduces the third space theory "as a strategy for dismantling all claims to cultural purity, solidity, and hierarchic perceptions."[19] Bhabha explains that this space constitutes the liminal space between subjects, specifically in a postcolonial context, which in itself provides the essential foundation for generating meaning.[20] Bhabha further explains that this liminal space produced by the meeting of difference highlights

[17] Ruth Illman, *Art and Belief: Artists Engaged in Interreligious Dialogue*, Cross Cultural Theologies (Oakville, CT: Equinox Pub, 2012), 58.
[18] Anderson, "Art and Inter-Religious Dialogue," 100.
[19] Ruth Illman, "Artists in Dialogue: Creative Approaches to Interreligious Encounters," *Approaching Religion* 1 (May 2011): 63. While there is not sufficient space to fully unpack the ways in which Nazrul's work lends illustration to Bhabha's here, this would be a worthwhile undertaking that even now suggests a means of support and activism for contemporary social justice movements and their intersection with the arts.
[20] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge Classics (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 53.

the "problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority: the attempt to dominate in the *name* of a cultural supremacy which is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation."[21] Indeed, Nazrul's work frequently calls many such claims to account—those based on religion, gender, ethnicity, class, and so on—as Nazrul's poetry calls for all such claims to be disregarded. It is clearly British superiority that Nazrul most greatly contests, but his poetry and life suggest that a view firmly rooted in the third space allowed him to see the ways in which other claims to superiority were ultimately not an antidote to British occupation and oppression. This critique, borne of the third space, reflects Bhabha's argument that "Postcolonial [or decolonial] criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order."[22] This bears some emphasis, as *decolonial* here does not simply mean the removal of the British from India, but a dismantling of the internalization of coloniality which Nazrul appears to see in those efforts to simply replace British rule with another that may also hinge on exclusivity and claims to cultural (or another type) of superiority. Yet Nazrul's critique goes even deeper, calling the individual to carefully reflect on their own beliefs, seeking out whatever ideas and beliefs offer greater hospitality to claims of superiority, such as beliefs about the "natural" inferiority of women or the exclusivity of one's religion.

Further demonstrating how this may have worked for Nazrul, Ruth Illman applies Bhabha's concept to aesthetic dialogue and observes that the third space here is "possessed and dominated neither by the self nor by the other. Instead, it constitutes a fundamentally 'shared space' where the flow between different realms of meaning and being are interconnected and shared between autonomous yet interdependent subjects."[23] It is therefore reasonable to understand that access to the third space is not automatic but requires some level of vulnerability on the part of all involved, allowing for them to see and be seen authentically and the interaction to be fruitful. It is therefore appropriate to visualize the third space as only accessible when one is willing to truly engage, to see and be seen, with another. In some ways this might be imagined as a transcending of difference, but as Illman points out, one of the key attributes of the third space is that it cannot be dominated—because even the idea or intention to do so would prevent one from even accessing this space—and this is what allows for a "flow between different realms of meaning and being." Without difference the third space would not exist at all, since it is the product of an interaction, and through this interaction parties remain distinct yet interconnected. This is a space of creativity, where difference constitutes ways of seeing and modes of knowing that dialogue with one another in a process of imagination spurring curiosity generating learning. "Thus, this third space introduces an inevitable aspect of ambivalence, openness and fluidity into the act of interpretation, as it is controlled neither by the one nor the other."[24] The third space allows difference to be experienced without attachments to hierarchy, exclusivity, correctness, or other barriers. Difference, then, is not simply transcended nor can it be amalgamated, because difference continues to exist, like a fractal, amidst the interactions of the third space. An individual in the third space has the opportunity to reflect on their own thoughts and beliefs, even their own bodies as Nazrul does; but there is no reason to believe that this means difference fades away in the manner that small bubbles collide to make big ones as this would suggest that

[21] Bhabha, 34.
[22] Bhabha, 171.
[23] Illman, "Artists in Dialogue: Creative Approaches to Interreligious Encounters," 63.
[24] Illman, 63.

underlying such an expectation is the belief that the need for agreement is a requirement of dialogue or the meeting of difference. But if this expectation is released, we may see that when differences meet in dialogue they actually evolve, as novelty begets reflection and reinvention.

Illman proposes that third space discourses "can be applied to unsettle essentialist understandings of the religious plural context."[25] Because the third space is not dominated or controlled by a single party, it becomes more difficult to perceive the Other through essentialist constructs often used to justify claims to exclusivity or superiority. In the losing of hierarchical attachments to difference the Other becomes simply human, the element of interconnectedness and shared suffering and joy become more apparent, and we approach the perspective of the Other with a good-natured curiosity and sense of wonder. We experience a grounded awareness of humanity that sees our interconnection in our feet on the ground, our hands and faces, our moments of loss, grief, love, hunger, strength, and compassion, alongside the realization that in our particularities we learn more about what it means to be human in our expressions, interpretations, questions, and beliefs. "The third space can be envisioned not only as a space where cultural power structures are exposed, but as a space where the ambiguity of the in-between is apprehended as an open-ended playfulness and creative interaction, enabling transformative interpersonal meaning-making. *An advantage of this formulation is its potential to enable differences to mutually transform each other without reaching any final fusion.*"[26] When the hierarchies attached to difference fall away, we have the chance to notice their construction, the assumptions, and beliefs they rely on, and perhaps most importantly, who stands to benefit most from them and why. This exposes them to critique and helps us realize that holding onto them is a choice that we then have the chance to reject. This is an especially important point in contexts where the power balance between these dialogical partners is greatly unbalanced. For example, below Nazrul's relationship with gender and women is highlighted with special attention paid to the ways in which he notices the oppression of women in a patriarchal context wherein he, as a man, could have more power. This will be explored further below.

Ultimately, the third space helps us critique the very idea that difference is a problem and asks instead what it is that would cause one to believe that it is. As Illman points out, the third space allows us to admit to the possibility of a "non-binary world where different shades of existence co-exist" which exposes the so-called "problem of difference" as a "result of one-sided structures of thought, rather than absolute reality."[27] Difference in these one-sided structures, she explains, tends to be thought of in binaries like true and false, right and wrong, and tends to perceive the Other as lacking in some way.[28] In such an interaction, the third space is not truly accessible by one who perceives difference as a result of lack, as it insinuates the absence of genuine intersubjectivity that may be the result of the aforementioned hierarchical constructs remaining, preventing true interchange.

The changes to thought and perception experienced in the third space may be slow and gradual, quick, or even painfully sudden, as any learning experience can be. Engaging in such a space inevitably changes one, who cannot unlearn, unsee, or unfeel what has been brought to

[25] Illman, 64.
[26] Illman, 64. Emphasis mine.
[27] Illman, 64.
[28] Illman, 64.

light in the third space. In the context of religion, theology, and spirituality this experience appears reflected in the description of the comparative theologian in liminal space articulated by Francis Clooney: "As the comparative theologian does her work with expert care and honesty and then takes it to heart, she ends up knowing too much and believing too much to be received with great ease in either the religious or academic setting. This uncomfortable borderline position not only must be tolerated but is necessary, and it must be intentionally nurtured."[29] The third space, the experience of liminality, is a transformative one and can be difficult, perhaps even painful, as much as it is wonderous and adventurous. The third space may be imagined as a sacred place then, one that is the goal of a pilgrimage not to a temple or mountain but in a space that only is born of true connection with others. Like any sacred place, we enter it mindfully and reflectively, and can lean on the experiences of those who are veterans of this space. Such individuals, involved in this dialogue especially at a practical level, tend to dismiss authoritarian claims to truth as inappropriate for this dialogue, "not because they see relativism as the proper position but because they attach greater importance to the unfinished and incomplete character of human knowledge and existence."[30]

What the third space shows us is that difference is not only a natural aspect of human life, but also a necessary aspect of it. It is the hierarchies we attach to difference, rather than difference itself, that hinders one's ability to communicate and interact across religious or spiritual lines. When approached through aesthetics, projects of creativity, difference is "not perverse obstacles to be feared, transmuted, hurdled over, converted, ignored, or dissolved, but invitations, prevenient signs, pointing to an infinitely rich and enigmatic ground from which genuine listening, seeing, and speaking emerge." [31] Mary Anderson puts it eloquently as she writes, "Difference is the generative possibility through which dialogue, art, and representation enter human life, and its innumerable forms—differences of gender and sexual orientation, ethnicity, national identity, race, age, occupation, religious faith—teach a multifaceted understanding of identity rather than a monolithic one."[32] Indeed, "it is only in relation to the other that one can truly become an I, as it is only against the background of a shared language that we can talk of finding one's own voice."[33] At times, the hierarchical constructions that hinder dialogue may only be apparent when viewed through the lens of the third space, wherein constructs like racism and patriarchy are exposed to harm not just those individuals directly targeted by such modes of discrimination, but the ways in which even those who are the "benefitting" end of the hierarchy are also harmed by it.

Importantly, as can be seen with Nazrul and others, this doesn't equate to an abandoning of the ways in which one exists in those hierarchies. Rather, we have the choice to participate in them, or participate in their dismantling so as to truly see the Other and to be seen by them, creating a reflective sense of empathy in the light of interconnectedness and intersubjectivity. This point bears emphasis: empathy is "a building block of morality—for people to follow the

[29] Francis X Clooney, *Comparative Theology Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 159.
[30] Illman, *Art and Belief*, 34.
[31] Anderson, "Art and Inter-Religious Dialogue," 103.
[32] Anderson, 103.
[33] Illman, "Artists in Dialogue: Creative Approaches to Interreligious Encounters," 63.

Golden Rule, it helps if they can put themselves in someone else's shoes."[34] The cultivation of empathy is associated with decreasing rates of violence, oppression, and the destruction of simplistic narratives that tend to feed oppressive hierarchies, such as racism, patriarchy, and homophobia.[35] This interaction does not create an amorphous cloud of relativism but rather an increasingly complex fractal of introspection and spiritual and cognitive growth. Differences don't need to be reconcilable to be profound in one's experience and personal evolution, and participants in these dialogues will undoubtedly discover irreconcilable differences that may, at times, challenge our own moral values and beliefs. Yet in that difference generates novelty that evolves through a connection that nurtures empathy, resists hegemony, and embraces one as a wholly interconnected being on this planet, I argue that difference is inherently good and beautiful because sameness and solidity generate no forward momentum. Difference is that by which all the world may come to know itself, which for humans refers especially to the ways in which we are interconnected amongst each other and between humanity and more-than-human.

The value of third spaces such as those found in aesthetic interreligious dialogue can therefore not be overstated, as our spiritual worlds often form the lens through which we encounter life. Within them, participants may come to know themselves and Others in unexpected and transformative ways, and outside of them the way that those participants exist in the world inevitably changes. Even those who do not participate in these dialogues can be transformed by interacting with those that do, because empathy is contagious. "When group norms encourage empathy, people are more likely to be empathic—and more altruistic."[36] As shall be explored below, this was certainly true for Nazrul whose altruism is attested in his activism against oppression and colonization in India. In what follows, I examine elements of some of Nazrul's most famous poems for these trademark qualities of the third space, allowing us to observe and learn from an illustration of liminality that, despite great effort, continues to resist definition.

The Third Space in Nazrul's Work

Nazrul's legacy is often interpreted as one that calls for people to transcend difference in favor of a secular, communal harmony. This suggests an attitude toward that difference that sees it as the problem, the reason for division and discord, and tends to not see the ways in which the hierarchies attached to difference are separate from the difference itself. For example, the idea that we can overcome racism by "not seeing color." But this approach to Nazrul's true message is difficult to accept in light of what we now understand as third or liminal spaces in aesthetic dialogue, regardless of the language Nazrul used at the time.

[34] "What Is Empathy?," *Science Center, Greater Good Magazine: Science-Based Insights for A Meaningful Life*, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/empathy/definition (accessed February 26, 2024).
[35] "What Is Empathy?"
[36] "What Is Empathy?"

Nazrul is aptly described by Rachel Fell McDermott as a "Muslim poet in the lap of a Hindu Mother," a reference to Nazrul's faith as a Muslim and devotion to the Goddess Kālī.[37] Nazrul's faith ultimately defies definition, as "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 longstanding 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."[38] Many arguments as to his true religiosity have been made, some simply landing on claims that he was "above religion," but I argue that this definition of Nazrul's spirituality simply sidesteps the more complicated aspects of his faith and practice. As McDermott notes, "Nazrul will always create problems for his audiences, either in holding up a near-impossible model of secular communal harmony in our times, or in being an irritant for those who would emphasize one side of him only."[39] In agreement, this essay does not seek to disentangle Nazrul's spirituality or define it, except to say that as he expressed it, Nazrul's spirituality reflected a liminal quality wherein he saw himself as a lover of the Divine and practiced that love through multiple venues. It is here that Nazrul's legacy tends to get murkier, as writers on Nazrul seem to display a belief that a definition of his personal spirituality is necessary for the interpretation of his poetry. As I explain further below, I argue that this preoccupation with sides, or with simply arguing a transcendent position, tends to obscure the greater wisdom offered by Nazrul much in the same way we may miss a jewel inside a box when we become too preoccupied with its wrapping paper. It is understandable then that McDermott and others see Nazrul's ideal of harmony as "near impossible," but when understood as a quality of aesthetic dialogue the "roots" of Nazrul's harmonious vision become more palpable. Conversely, to simplify Nazrul is to obscure the path toward that understanding, as McDermott writes, "precisely because of Nazrul's complexity, he inspires unbroken fascination and endless pathos."[40]

What we can say for sure about Nazrul is that his involvement in aesthetic spaces began very early in his life. It bears remembering that aesthetics refers not just to what we may think of as the arts, but also to embodied practices like ritual and pilgrimage. From a young age, Nazrul became responsible for the maintenance of his family mosque and local shrines and found additional belonging in musical groups such as *leto* troupes, gatherings of folk-musicians, and poets, wherein Nazrul became familiar with the *purāṇas* and began to compile his own compositions.[41] Very much a child of his context, Nazrul grew up in the richness of Bengal, music, poetry, theater, and worship flowing between communities of Muslim, Hindus, and others. As an adult, Nazrul wrote poetry rooted in Islamic spirituality and symbolism as well as Hindu spirituality and myth, even tantric ritual, both displaying a clear sense of devotion and faith.[42]

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[37] 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, First edition, The Oxford History of Hinduism (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018), 281.
[38] Syed, "Come, O Comet! Build a Bridge of Fire Across Darkness!: A Theological Reflection on the Bhakti-Mysticism of Kazi Nazrul Islam," 88.
[39] McDermott, "A 'Muslim' Poet in the Lap of a 'Hindu' Mother: Kazi Nazrul Islam and the Goddess Kālī," 301.
[40] McDermott, 301.
[41] Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 21–22. Gopal Haldar, *Kazi Nazrul Islam* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1973), 23.
[42] See for example Nazrul's poems entitled *Shono shono yaa Elahi* (O Allah, listen to my prayer), *Kabar Ziarate tumi* (O, the pious one, you go to Kaba for your pilgrimage), *Srijana Chande Anande* (O, Nataraj, dance with ecstasy), and *Amer*

The third space figures prominently in Nazrul's life and work. In his context, Nazrul was not just born into but inherited an external dialogue already in progress in aesthetic spaces, including those of worship. Music became a way in which Nazrul could go beyond learning about Hindu traditions in a doctrinal sense, because music carries with it the emotions and spirituality of its players. Such interactions likely contributed greatly to the deconstruction of any internalized barriers that might be imagined in such a context, as Nazrul flourished here into an adult whose activism well reflected an empathy of deep relationality with those whose art he encountered. As Nazrul began to make his own music and poetry, this dialogue moves from the external to the internal, one that Nazrul clearly carried on through the way he chose to live his life. His marriage to a Hindu woman, Pramila Sengupta (d. 1962), whom he loved deeply, was perceived as an act of open dissent by some Muslims. Shortly before the wedding, writer A.D. Kamruzzaman wrote that a Hindu wife would "further de-Islamize" Nazrul while another local paper, *Moslem Jagot* (Muslim World), published a letter written by one Khan Bahadur congratulating the couple "but insisting that the bride must put her trust in the Koran and accept Islam as the guiding principle of her life" which he hoped would provide an example for conversion to others.[43] This appalled Nazrul, who refused to seek Pramila's conversion and instead continued to participate in Hindu life within his family and community. He gave his children names like Krishna Muhammad (d. 1923) and Kazi Aniruddha (d. 1974), "constantly" sang *Hari-Naam* (names of Hari or Viṣṇu) to Pramila's dying aunt Birajasundari Devi in 1938, inaugurated several Durgā Pūjā celebrations, and referred to God as Bhagavān, Jagajjananī (The Mother of the World), and Ambikā (Mother) in letters he wrote to Birajasundari.[44]

Nazrul was famously hospitable and generous, and appeared to be comfortable floating between worlds, and quickly took up arguments that sought to define or challenge this aspect of his life. But this is evident in far more than only his personal and family life. Nazrul was an anti-colonial activist who wanted to take his great lesson to the people in their fight for freedom. When considered in light of the third space, the transition from artist in dialogue to social activist and protector of that dialogue is a smooth one as the empathy of third spaces makes it impossible to ignore the suffering and injustices perpetuated against ourselves and others. More than that, it calls into question the ways in which we (willingly or unwillingly) participate in that suffering by way of the hierarchies we attach to difference, which tend to rely on claims of solidity or "simplification," which cannot be undone or healed only by rising above them, lest we erase or ignore the healing to be done.

Nazrul's fiery devotion translated into an equally fiery resistance to what he saw as the Ram-Khunti, the Big Pillar, representing the orthodoxies of Indian society during his life that "gagged the individual in a hundred forms such as laws, regulations, customs, rules [and] taboos."[45] Mitra explains that these included at least the following five: "(1) British colonial establishment in India, (2) the Gandhian non-violent Non-cooperation movement that formed the mainstream of the Indian national struggle in the 1920s, (3) Islamic fundamentalism and intellectual authoritarianism, (4) Hindu social prejudice and cultural chauvinism, and finally, (5)

Kali Meyer Payer Talai Dekhe Ja Re Alor Nachon (Come see the dancing of light at the feet of my daughter Kali) in Nazrul Islam and Kazi, *Kazi Nazrul Islam*.

[43] Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 199–200.

[44] McDermott, "A 'Muslim' Poet in the Lap of a 'Hindu' Mother: Kazi Nazrul Islam and the Goddess Kālī," 287.

[45] Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 112.

Tagore-centered literary orthodoxy in Bengal."[46] In this paper I will not address items two and five, as it is mainly Nazrul's approach to religious difference and a related communal solidarity that is of interest here. However, they are meaningful avenues of further exploration and research.

Nazrul showed fearless conviction in his hearty critiques of religious authority. One of his most famous statements comes from a letter published in the *Hindu Musalman* in 1922, "...I cannot tolerate the Tikism...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."[47] Nazrul is referring to the preoccupation with trivial outward appearance, as if one's entire faith relies more on one's beard or tufts of hair than it does on charity or compassion. Religious bigotry is a prominent feature in many of Nazrul's poems, such as "O Young Ones, Wake Up!" wherein Nazrul appeals for youth to stand against prejudice:

> *Come charging in*
> *Pulverize the walls of bigotry*
> *Come with your heads high*
> *Break through all barriers*
> *Break through the impediment of deceitful tenets*
> …
> *Rise*
> *Preach the spirit of humanity above religion, color, and race*
> *Only you can resolve all discords*
> *Get over all pettiness*
> *Bestow upon human the highest esteem!*[48]

This call to "preach the spirit of humanity above religion" is often considered in a transcendent sense, but a deeper meaning is possible when we notice that Nazrul is not simply speaking of religious differences, that is, how a Muslim may see themselves as different from a Hindu. Nazrul specifies bigotry, deceit, and pettiness, the things attached to the way we think about difference rather than difference itself. Likewise, in his poem "Fanaticism is not Religion," Nazrul says "Under the guise of religion, the bullies and the pretenders have a pact; they stir up the ignorant mass as part of their vile selfish act. They foster hatred and prejudice among different faith or nation; these devils cherish power, while feeding themselves is their only preoccupation…"[49] In an editorial entitled *Joog Bani,* Nazrul appeals to specific faith communities: "Come brother Hindu! Come Musalman! Come Buddhist! Come Christian! Let us transcend all barriers, let us forsake forever all smallness, all lies, all selfishness and let us fall brothers as brothers. We shall quarrel no more."[50] The barriers Nazrul refers to are not the traditions themselves, but the "smallness" and lies that likely refer to essentialized caricatures of the Other, while "selfishness" may refer to claims to exclusivity whether in heaven or on earth. While we cannot necessarily

[46] Mitra, 110.
[47] Nitu and Khan, "Treatment of Religiousness in Kazi Nazrul Islam," 23.
[48] Nazrul Islam and Kazi, *Kazi Nazrul Islam*, 176.
[49] Kazi Nazrul Islam, "Fanaticism Is Not Religion," trans. Mohammad Omar Farooq, Poetrynook.com, https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/fanaticism-not-religion (accessed February 26, 2024).
[50] Nitu and Khan, "Treatment of Religiousness in Kazi Nazrul Islam," 22.

argue for Nazrul's true meaning, what is evident is that Nazrul appears to have been aware of the ways in which these traditions were lied about and manipulated in order to further the agenda of the religious elite. What is transcended is not one's tradition, but rigidity and claims to superiority that often rely on essentialist narratives that depict the Other in a light that upholds such claims.

Aesthetics, as mentioned, is also a realm of embodiment. Differences housed in or expressed by the body, such as gender identity and sexuality, are also brought into the fold as elements of an individual. Like differences of religion or spirituality, the third space makes palpable the ways in which we attach hierarchy to gender, which features prominently in Nazrul's poetry through works such as *Jago Nari Nago Bahnni Shikha*, "Wake up women rise like blazing flame."

> *Wake up women, rise like blazing flame*
> *Wake up with bright red sign on your forehead*
> *Engulf the surroundings with your brilliant charm*
> *Overwhelm the earth with your maddening dance*
> *O, the victims of rape, strike like serpents*
> *Show your power which can burn the earth*
> *Blaze up from smoking flame*
> *Wake up mothers, sisters, daughters, wives!*
> *O, the stampeded ones*
> *Descend from [heaven] like the powerful river 'Jahnnobi'*[51]
> *Bring lightning in dark cloud*
> *Rise as ever vibrant, ever victorious*[52]

Nazrul's relationship with Hindu Śākta (goddess-oriented) tradition is plainly evident here, as his reference to the "maddening dance" recalls his devotion to Kālī who is often depicted dancing wildly in the hearts and minds of devotees like the famed poet Kamalākānta Bhaṭṭācārya (d. 1821) who wrote "Every-blissful Kālī…for Your own amusement You dance, clapping your hands…"[53] Dance also may refer to a vibration, as "Śāktī is spontaneous vibration, the fullness of her blissful state and the outbursting of her joy compelling her towards self-unfolding" which seems to reflect Nazrul's encouragement that women "overwhelm the earth" with their own unfolding.[54]

Śākta traditions are popular in Bengal and whether one is a devotee of Mahadevī (Great Goddess) in one of Her forms (including Kālī) or not, one involved in Bengal's music and art scene would be familiar with the Devī Mahatmyam (DM). Comprising chapters 81–93 of the *Markendeya Purana*, the DM is a canonical text of Śāktas. Additionally, as mentioned Nazrul was a devotee of Kālī and is known to have been a student of Baradacaran Majumdar whom he called Śrī Śrī Caraṇārabindeṣu.[55] Connecting these points is verse 11.6 from the DM that relates the

[51] Also spelled "Jahnavi" this is a tributary of the Bhagirathi, sometimes considered a source of the Ganges, in Uttarakhand state of India.
[52] Nazrul Islam and Kazi, *Kazi Nazrul Islam*, 177.
[53] Rachel Fell McDermott, *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kālī and Umā from Bengal* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 49.
[54] Ajit Mookerjee, *Kali: The Feminine Force* (New York: Destiny Books, 1988), 23.
[55] McDermott, "A 'Muslim' Poet in the Lap of a 'Hindu' Mother: Kazi Nazrul Islam and the Goddess Kālī," 288.

Great Goddess to the women of the world: "Oh Goddess, all that is knowable are your various distinctions, and all women in the world reflect your capacity entirely."[56] Nazrul's poem therefore reflects a belief in women's inherent divinity and suggests a belief that women are not in need of rescuing, as they are capable of summoning this power in their own defense. Nazrul's specificity when he mentions rape is also interesting, as it roots his understanding of women's suffering in the body and the ways in which their bodies, or arguments about women's bodies, have been used against them. Visualized through the lens of the third space, Nazrul's support of women reflects an awareness of the ways in which his body differs from theirs, and as a result he sees their bodies as not just equal but inherently divine. Consequently, Nazrul does not rush to rescue women or call for anyone else to—he gets out of their way and sings his encouragement for them to discover and embrace a powerfully divine nature. Another significant problem for Nazrul was that women were unfairly labeled as morally inferior or closer to sin than men. In his poem *Nari* or "Women," Nazrul expresses his belief that differences of gender do not equate to value judgements and says of sin: "Who belittles you as woman, connecting you to Hell's flame? Tell him that for the first ever sin, not woman, but man must carry the blame."[57] Making several references to the ways in which Nazrul sees women oppressed, such as the "veil that made you timid," he adds: "If man imprisons woman, then the turn will come sure; in the same prison he built, he will rot and die without a cure."[58] The third space is undoubtedly not the only one that helps humanity to perceive our interconnectedness, but it may be argued that it certainly clarifies our interconnectedness and the ways in which hierarchies attached to difference ultimately harm all involved. Nazrul ends this poem by saying, "Not very far, is that cherished day, when with homage to man, to woman also homage, the world will pay."[59] An awareness of difference highlights balance, or rather imbalance, in our ideas about nature, equality, and right life. These points are made especially clear in another of Nazrul's most famous poems, entitled *Barangana* or "Prostitute." Nazrul begins this poem by asking "Who calls you prostitute, Mother?" For some, Nazrul's use of "mother" may be read as elevating the status of the woman in question, emphasizing her untainted humanity.[60] Nafisa Ahsan Nitu and Mohammad Ehsanul Islam Khan see in it "an advocate for the emancipation of women; both traditional and non-traditional women were portrayed by him with utmost sincerity."[61] Reflecting a more Muslim reading, Nazrul's poetry can sometimes carry double meanings. "Mother" or "Maa" is a common way Śāktas address the Goddess, already demonstrated to also refer to all women, and reference to the loving relationship found in bhakti that often envisions the bhakta, practitioner of bhakti, as a child.[62] Moreover, in this poem, Nazrul calls into question the structures that create these labels and other labels associated with them, such as the "illegitimate child:"

> *Who are the bigots*
> *who condescendingly label your son*
> *as an 'illegitimate' child?*

[56] Swami Satyananda Saraswati, trans., *Chandi Path*, 6th ed. (Napa, California: Devi Mandir Publications, 2010), 270.
[57] Kazi Nazrul Islam, "Nari-Women," trans. Mohammad Omar Farooq, Poemhunter.com, https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/woman-121/ (accessed February 26, 2024).
[58] Islam.
[59] Islam.
[60] Nitu and Khan, "Treatment of Religiousness in Kazi Nazrul Islam," 22.
[61] Nitu and Khan, 22.
[62] June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13.

To them I simply ask these questions.
How many of the 1,500 million children
of this world were born
purely out of the purpose of procreation,
and not out of lust?
How many are pure and chaste?
For whose sin do millions of sucklings
die in the cradle?

This point is key, because Nazrul also ends this poem thusly:

So, listen, religious leaders:
There's no difference between 'illegitimate'
and 'legitimate' children!
And if the son of an unchaste mother is 'illegitimate,'
so is the son of an unchaste father.[63]

Here, Nazrul is making specific references to some of the labels used to degrade and oppress women who are, for whatever reason, prostitutes, and their children. Once again, structures of oppression, this time manifesting as cultural taboos and one-sided morality standards, are what this poem challenges. When those structures are overcome, transcended, or released (however it may be experienced) what remains is an awareness that the plight of such women has been heavily misconstrued in favor of the authority and appeals to morality made by religious elites and those that support them. Difference remained, however, as Nazrul appears to have made no attempt to claim that the differences in question were erased or flattened. Instead, these differences helped him see more clearly the ways in which another group of humans was being oppressed. It, therefore, would have also given him the opportunity to see how his own group, men, participated in that suffering. As a result, he places greater accountability on men for their behavior, as well as religious elites for their role in this oppression. It is not enough to say simply that Nazrul believed in women's equality. He also believed in accountability on the part of oppressors, and we may surmise that this accountability would invoke change. The impact of the third space is well depicted here as it is not simply disparity but the *reasons for disparity*, the hierarchies attached to difference, that Nazrul fearlessly challenges. Once again, this serves to illustrate the aforementioned work of Homi Bhabha and demonstrates that the transformation of oneself in the third space inspires and cultivates a sense of radical honesty and a commitment to justice, including for those who inherited colonial legacies and power.

Finally, looming over all other hierarchies and barriers, the British colonization of India and its subsequent erasure of Indian identity was understood as the foremost enemy by Nazrul. "In an early article in the Nabojug (1920) he had asserted how man, who is born free, is gradually enslaved by these enemies one after another.[64] But among these, lack of national independence was by far the deadliest enemy of the individual."[65] Far more can be said about Nazrul's anti-colonial activism than can be justly presented here, and so focus will be paid

[63] Nazrul Islam, "Prostitute," Poetry archive, trans. Sajed Kamal, Poemhunter.com, May 29, 2012, https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/prostitute-8/ (accessed February 26, 2024).
[64] A reference to the Ram-Khunti, Big Pillar, representing five modes of oppression in India mentioned earlier.
[65] Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 112.

primarily to the ways in which Nazrul's most enduring poem, *Bidrohi*, helps to elucidate third space discourse and transformation.

Of those orthodoxies Nazrul confronted, the British colonization of India was "a veritable evil that had come into being by brute force and functioned as a barbarous imperialism."[66] In his paper *Kazi Nazrul Islam and Decolonisation: Poetry as Praxis of Political Intervention and Cultural Ecology*, Habibur Rahaman explains that "[Nazrul's] decolonial poetics contests colonial constructs of Indian identity that was morphed into a suppressed, obsequious, and sequestered entity."[67] As mentioned above, Nazrul's work may be thought of as inherently decolonial because he sought to help free India from not just the British, but from any claim to a singular superiority that would flatten India's wonderous diversity and perpetuate the same oppression so plainly evident during British occupation. Nazrul could see that it was not just colonization, but the claims and arguments underneath it that created oppression; from his view in the liminal, Nazrul (through his poetry) calls for resistance against all of these claims and, perhaps most importantly, he could not just imagine, but *perceive* a world without them and it is here that difference becomes free to inspire rather than hinder. Nazrul is quoted as saying "be ye men again?" in response to what some call a "moral demise" preventing Indians from recovering lost identity and imagining any rule other than the British.[68] In order to maintain power in India, the British utilized a program of "divide and rule," meant to help prevent the diverse peoples of India from coming together against the British. "Towards the people and the army it meant an emphasis on differences of caste and creed in order to prevent, as John Strachey once wrote, 'the growth of any dangerous identity of feeling from community of race, religion, caste, or local feeling.'"[69] Projects like the British census and the 31 famines in 120 years of British rule, including a devastating famine in 1896–1897 in which around one million people died (shortly before Nazrul's birth in 1899) were strongly felt by those, like Nazrul, who saw a weakening of India's people that prevented them from uniting against British rule. Nazrul, fighting like a poet, is described by Rahaman as engaging in the "cultural emancipation of the masses" through the role of the "colonized intellectual," developing an "aesthetics of resistance" that confronted the colonists "with the very physical and cultural forces they have wielded upon the physical and psychic world of the colonized."[70] Nazrul's "I Sing of Equality" is often held as the exemplar of this ethos, as such poetry showcases Nazrul's love and respect for humanity. And in December of 1921 Nazrul penned the "supreme expression" of his dissent, entitled *Bidrohi*, "The Rebel." Mitra describes Bidrohi as a "highly abstract sentiment that vowed to pull down the existing cosmos along with its ordainer in order to build a new one immune from all imperfections that have bedeviled the present universe."[71] Nazrul saw his work as the "cultural emancipation" of a people whose differences had been turned against them, and Bidrohi depicts their reunion as beginning with the destruction of the world they've come to know and accept. "Lashing through the mighty sky of the might universe, passing beyond the moon, sun, planets, and stars, penetrating the earth, orbits and the heaven, severing the throne of God I've risen…I'm the cyclone, the destruction,

[66] Mitra, 118.
[67] Habibur Rahaman, "Kazi Nazrul Islam and Decolonisation: Poetry as Praxis of Political Intervention and Cultural Ecology," *Asiatic* 16, no. 1 (June 2022): 121.
[68] Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 119.
[69] Neil Stewart, "Divide and Rule: British Policy in Indian History," *Science & Society* 15, no. 1 (1951): 49.
[70] Rahaman, "Kazi Nazrul Islam and Decolonisation: Poetry as Praxis of Political Intervention and Cultural Ecology," 123–24.
[71] Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*, 121.

the curse of the world, fear terrible!" [72] Nazrul's words convey an almost drunk-with-power spirit that brings to mind a frenzied dance of destruction, while he directly associates himself with Indrani ("I'm Indrani's son—carry the moon in my hand") and Krishna ("I'm Krishna's throat, churn'd poison").[73] He continues, this time not speaking to the people of India, but portraying himself in all of them: "I'm an ascetic, a melody-soldier, I'm the prince, fad'd out is my ochreous royal attire! I'm Bedouin, I'm Genghis" and as the tools of various spiritual forms, "In the bugle of Israfil, I'm the terrifying roar!...I'm the dreadful sound of the mystic syllable – Om!...The fire-wing of angel Gabriel I grab violently!...I'm the flute of Orpheus…and I'm the Shyam's flute."[74] Further, Nazrul aligns himself with various natural elements such as "I'm the volcano, the annihilating wild fire, I'm the blaze under the sea, the drunken flare, Beneath the earth, I'm the sea uproarious…I'm the monsoon, deluge, and flood, I'm injustice, meteors, Saturn, the blaze of comet, cobra venomous!"[75] Instead of portraying India's diverse people, he portrays himself as all of them in one way or another, and takes it further by identifying with the Earth, rivers, volcanos, planets and other celestial bodies, and the Divine in various manifestations. Nazrul is both the cause of destruction and the impetus of rebirth, finally resting, he says in the second to last stanza, "when the wailing and outcry of the oppress'd in the air and sky will not be echo'd, when the clanking of the tyrant's sword will no more resonate across the terrible battle-field, O the rebel, battle-weari'd, that day I'll be quiet."[76]

Unlike the aforementioned poems wherein Nazrul specifically identifies structures of oppression (or at least refers to them) as he calls India's diverse landscape to action, Bidrohi takes on an almost divinely inspired spirit. From a Śākta perspective, Nazrul's use of imagery recalls the *Atha Tantroktam Devī Sūktam,* The Tantric Praise of the Goddess. Also called the Hymn to Aparājitā (the Undefeated), it is recited at the end of the Devī Mahatmyam and shares an interesting similarity with Nazrul's use of words in Bidrohi. The essence of the DM is the victory of the Great Goddess over forces of ego and distracting thought that upset the balance of life and create oppression in the world. In this hymn, She is petitioned and revered in a way that highlights the nondualistic nature of this philosophy. She is named as "extremely beautiful and extremely fierce," and Her forms are described as that of Faith (*śraddhā*), Hunger (*kṣudhā*), True Wealth (*lakṣmī*), Peace (*śanti*), Satisfaction (*tuṣṭi*), and Confusion (*bhrānti*).[77] The hymn depicts an image of the Divine as truly One, different in expression but unified in Truth, as much present in hunger as She is in peace, confusion as much as satisfaction. She, who may also be depicted as Mother Earth or Maa Bharat, Mother India, *is* Her many different children and creations even as She remains unified. Her differences do not malign Her unity. Difference is a quality of creation, an intended one, with an underlying unity that is not diminished by difference. Instead, it is the willful choice of some beings to harm others that throws off the balance, demonstrating again that it is not difference that is the problem or that would prevent unity, but the way that difference is treated.

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[72] Nazrul Islam, *The Fiery Lute—Agnibina*, ed. Binoy Barman, trans. Mustofa Munir (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Nazrul Institute, 2018), 24.
[73] Nazrul Islam, 25.
[74] Nazrul Islam, *The Fiery Lute—Agnibina*, 25–27. In Islamic theology, 'Isrāfīl blows the trumpet that signals *Yawm al-Qiyāmah*, the Day of Reckoning or Judgment.
[75] Nazrul Islam, 27–28.
[76] Nazrul Islam, 28.
[77] Saraswati, *Chandi Path*, 320–28.

In his reflection on Bidrohi, translator and scholar Prof. Mustofa Munir eloquently says "I see Poet's radiant expression is beaming from this poem like the rays of the glorious morning sun shining from the peaks of the Himalaya."[78] Indeed, the full experience of Bidrohi can hardly be adequately contained or expressed here, and there are potentially many ways to read this and other aspects of Nazrul's work. Yet Bidrohi serves to illustrate Nazrul's goal of cultural revolution, I argue, by empathetically enabling readers ability to see their differences as a blessed strength that serves to highlight the shared nature of their pain under a British boot. If difference is beautiful in the Divine, why is it not beautiful in humanity? The third space seems to run like a current through Nazrul's work, again and again reflecting the experience of one who has discovered difference as not only beautiful, but as a treasure that was robbed from India's people in the effort to coerce their compliance and keep them warring amongst themselves. When difference itself is transcended we run the risk of erasing our particularities and relativizing them, obliterating them in the name of unity. But we cannot separate who we are from the ways that we are different, whether on a personal or national level, and so any effort asking for differences to be, in any way, ignored or set aside is reasonably unsustainable, if not outright violent.

Nazrul's Gift

Nazrul's work is profoundly illustrative of the transformative power of liminal or third spaces, especially when examined as decolonial praxis and critique which while, rooted in Indian context, offers profound insight to contemporary decolonial movements, including individual efforts to "decolonize" oneself from labels, beliefs, and practices that reinforce and perpetuate the harm of colonization on every level, even the most subtle. Examined thusly, his poetry reflects the empathy, self-reflection, and comfort with difference that is possible when the conflation of difference and hierarchy are disrupted. It demonstrates that difference is not the enemy of unity and brings our awareness to the ways we choose to define difference, most of all through the separating of hierarchies and claims to superiority from difference itself.

Nazrul's poetry seems to depict a desire for more than just political solidarity. It encourages us to bravely explore ourselves and the Other when barriers to that interaction are removed, with the expectation being an increasingly complex spiritual and humanistic revolution that stands in stark contrast to the idea of solidity. I suggest then that Nazrul's true legacy is this expression of the third space and his demonstration of the potential of aesthetic dialogue as the dialogue of the people, especially as it tends to hold religious and spiritual elites accountable in their service to our communities. Indeed, it helps create a means by which all authority can be held accountable, including personal authority. In doing so, difference is protected and cherished, and unity can be attained through a powerful empathy and common humanity that understands difference as an integral part of what it means to be human. Nazrul inspires us to become more mindful of the way we talk about difference, which is a natural aspect of life, and the hierarchies we place upon difference, which are not. Though Nazrul does use language that speaks to the transcending of difference, his work displays more clearly that he is likely talking about the hierarchies attached to difference while difference itself is embraced and celebrated.

[78] Nazrul Islam, *The Fiery Lute—Agnibina*, 29.

Instead of leaving difference behind, Nazrul's legacy guides us to realize such hierarchies are not inherent to those differences, and that to fully reclaim our diversity is to reclaim our unity.

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