"Young martyr of young blood!": Cosmopolitan Style and War against Empire in Nazrul's *Kāmāl Pāshā*

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Abstract

With an unprecedented revolutionary zeal for liberation and experimentations with the poetic genres meant for creating shock among readers/listeners, Kazi Nazrul Islam's collection of poems, *Agnibinā*, published in 1922, marks a paradigm shift from the lyric-oriented Bengali Poetry. Openly declared political engagement, accompanied by a militant rhythm that sways between pathos and vigour, of Nazul's poems can be seen to anticipate even Tagore's anti-imperialist later poems, like "Africa", 1936. While the epoch-making "*Bidrohi*" reaches out to the indomitable spirit of mankind from the rooted myths and sensibilities, a series of poems in *Agnibinā* reviews the history of East-West relations by re-telling the anti-European heroics of Islamic fighters of Constantinople and Turkey –the meeting point of the two halves of the world. This paper focuses particularly on how "*Kāmāl Pāshā*", a saga on Pāshā's victory over the Greek army and sacrifice of numerous young Turkish soldiers, extends modernist cosmopolitanism to reconstitute a horizon of free humanity beyond any brooding over 'waste land', and, on the other hand, establish intimacy between victims of Empire across spatiotemporal distances. T.S. Eliot in his brief introduction to David Jones' war poem "In Parenthesis", 1937, draws attention to allusions and footnotes of English modernist poetry, but "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" shares same features to a radically different purpose. The homeward march in Nazrul's song – intersected by prose narratives of historical setting and military instructions in a generic interplay – thus employs modernist aesthetics of motion and dissonance, but its positive relation to past provides a humanist alternative to the 'heaps of broken images' in Eurocentric modernism.

Keywords: modernist poetry, imperialism, genre, East- West relation, cosmopolitanism

Thomas Stearns Eliot, in his short introduction to David Jones' epic on the First World War, *In Parenthesis* (1937), very categorically designates the generation of English modernist literary artists: "David Jones is a representative of the same literary generation as Joyce and Pound and myself, if four men born between 1882 and 1895 can be regarded as of the same literary generation" ("A Note of Introduction" x). The life and career of this generation, as Eliot admits, "were altered" ("A Note of Introduction" x) by the First World War and turbulent events in the opening decades of the twentieth century, which constituted the setting of the aesthetics of modernism as that of motion and dissonance, and of ambivalence and hybridity. Imperial relations, and the War, itself being the most organized and brutal exploitations of mankind on account of the rivalry among European states for greater shares of the earth, played key roles in turning modernism into a global movement. Modernism of the nineteen twenties and thirties, thus, while being reviewed after a century, comes to involve categorization and hierarchies as well as resistance and rebellions well beyond Eliot's nomenclature. Interestingly, Eliot's "A Note of Introduction" written for Jones' poem, ends with an observation on the appreciation of the modernist poetry that seeks to overcome the intellectual distance between the text and its readers: "If *In Parenthesis* does not excite us before we have understood it, no commentary will reveal to us its secret.... understanding begins in the sensibility. We must have the experience before we attempt to explore the sources of the work itself" (x). Eliot's emphasis on 'experiencing' a poem 'sensibly' helps us to appreciate the modernist art in a broader context, and this is particularly significant in relation to the work of Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), which certainly inaugurates a new era in Bengali poetry in the early nineteen twenties by introducing a cosmopolitan style matched with a powerful evocation of the universal human spirit while being deeply rooted in its own culture and society. As the publication of Nazrul's early seminal texts coincides with arguably the explosion of the so-called 'High Modernism' of European literature in the early nineteen twenties, a peak being reached in 1922, the Bengali rebel poet responds to an ever-evolving dynamics of global modernity with competing urgencies of anti-British nationalism, international and socialist humanism, anti-communalism, and aesthetic individualism. Nazrul's poetry cultivates a self-reflexive participatory strategy that assimilates combative mode of expression, a fellow-feeling for the suffering mankind, history of real politics, unremitting ideals and a very composite mythical structure.

The year 1922 established Nazrul in the late-Renaissance Bengali cultural sphere not only as a pathfinder of Bengali poetry but also as a political rebel. Fresh from the warfront, from which he had returned in 1920 because of the dissolution of a regiment of the British Army, called 'Bengali Paltan', Nazrul found himself amidst a host of intersecting political forces of the early-twenties: the Civil-disobedience movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi that faced a setback by the incident of Chauri Chaura in 1922 and resultant divisions among the Congress leadership, the Khilafat movement and nation-wide mass agitation, initial socialist activities and dialogues in exile, the declaration of 'Swaraj' as a goal followed by a stronger demand for complete independence, and Hindu and Muslim communalism. Nazrul's kind of modernism is then to be addressed in terms of its direct interactions with the late-colonial modernity of the sub-continent progressing towards a postcolonial one. Multiple activities of Nazrul, as a political activist, a journalist, an editor, a literary critic, a novelist, a lyricist, and a performing-artist further lead us towards a perception of the 1920s' modernism, to use Tim Armstrong's observation, "as not merely avant-garde in terms of *form*, while adopting a socially

alienated stance, but conversely as knitted into traditions in which art and social and political life are constantly brought into relation" (64). In this respect, being involved in a struggle to reinvent an oppositional public sphere in conflict with the poetics of evasion, the activist-artist from the colony also considered her/himself as avant-garde. Furthermore, Nazrul's arrival serves as an indicator of a new journey of Bengali vernacular literature that now "account for … infusing foreign influences with the socio-cultural contingencies and uncanny sensibilities of a prolonged colonial subjectivity" (Ray 167). An ideology of cosmopolitanism is found to be invoked by the inter-Wars Bengali authors with a belief that the fight for cultural and political decolonization and self-determination of any community of people at one part of the globe is ultimately interlinked with the same kind of fight at another part. Nazrul's poetry challenges the institutional orders and boundaries – as suggested by the dreadfully floating self in the poem "*Bidrohi*" ("The Rebel") – with a definite realization about a changing world, that is, under the imperial rule the colonized, the subaltern, the soldier, the labour, the woman, the 'deviant', the freedom fighter, the rebel, and the artist are all in exile in a homeless world unless they can actively come forward in support of each other's cause. Thus, any reading of Nazrul's post-First World War works within the framework of the modernist literature – that is supposed to touch its pinnacle in 1922 – is depended, to use Santanu Das's words, "on what criteria we bring to define 'modernism'" and this "in turn shows how diffuse the term continues to be" (Das 71).

The foremost poet and critic of the 'Kallol Era' – organized around the launch of the literary periodical, *Kallol*, in 1923 – Buddhadev Bose embraces the modernist turn in Bengali poetry in an essay entitled "Rabindranath o Uttarsadhak" ("Rabindranath and followers," 1952): "From Nazrul Islam to Subhas Mukhopadhyay; the inter-Wars period: during these twenty years Bengali poetry gets rid of its childhood, spent in the shelter provided by Rabindranath" (117; our translation). However, Bose's comment in the same essay that "Nazrul himself was unaware that he was leading a new era, and there is political rebellion in Nazrul's writing, but there is no literary rebellion" (110; our translation) can be argued over in consideration of Nazrul's constant experiments with form and theme. Nazrul's literary output from the soldier's camp, for instance, includes translations of Hafiz and Persian poets, before emerging as a central man of letters from 1919 to 1922. As suggested before, his continuous shifts from one role to another, while radically displacing their institutional orientations and codes of operation, signal the advent of modernism in Bengali culture. 1922, especially, began with the publication of his most celebrated poem "*Bidrohi*", composed in the previous year, in a weekly magazine, the *Bijli*. The poem has kept generations of readers enthralled by its evocation of human potential to reach above all the binding forces – a dialectical reversal of its contemporary composition, Eliot's "The Waste Land". But, "*Bidrohi*" is simultaneously one of the first Bengali poems to be densely allusive, interconnecting Classical Hindu, Islamic and Greek pre-Christian mythology and employing a cosmopolitan vocabulary. The poem was later included in the collection of twelve poems, *Agnibinā* (*The lyre of fire*), published in October, 1922. The collection was published by the poet himself, while its cover was composed by the pioneer of Indian modern art, Abanindranath Thakur. In a quintessentially modernist act Nazrul exemplifies a propagandist publisher-author, and 1922 is also distinguished by the launch of his independently published socio-cultural biweekly organ, the *Dhumketu* (*The Comet*). In "Dhumketur Pothe" ("The way of *Dhumketu*"), Nazrul demands complete independence of the motherland. In November,

1922[1], after the publication of a poem "Anandamayeer Agamone" ("Arrival of the goddess of joy") – a reworking of the myth of the arrival of the goddess Durga on the earth to destroy all evil powers – in the autumn issue of the *Dhumketu* the British government issued an arrest warrant against the poet. Nazrul is probably the first poet in this subcontinent to be convicted of spreading any-state sentiment by writing a poem and imprisoned by the imperial state.

For Gertrude Stein in "Poetry and Grammar," a part of her *Lectures in America*, delivered in 1934, when after thirty years living in Paris, the centre of European 'High Modernism' she returned to her native country, "Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing noun" (231). Now, the poet of *Agnibinā* constantly transforms a series of categories – a chain of signifiers/nouns – available around Bengali cultural practices under colonial rule. *The collection of* poems heralds a paradigm shift from lyric-oriented characteristically timid Bengali poetry, while re-appropriating some of its components, with an unprecedented revolutionary zeal for liberation and experiments with poetic forms designed to shock readers/listeners, and to incite them to 'lose' an imposed state of submission and to 'want' to freely exercise body and mind. Aesthetic experiments and political motives collaborate in *Agnibinā*, whose poems with their openly proclaimed political involvement and militant rhythm that sways between pathos and vigour, suppression and expression, may be regarded also as foreshadowing Tagore's anti-imperialist later poems, such as "Africa," 1936. The rhyme pattern of Nazrul is much influenced by that of the most prominent exponent of the Late-Tagore Bengali poetry, Satyendranath Dutta (born in 1882), whose demise in June 1922 was commemorated in an editorial by Nazrul written for the newspaper the *Dainik Shebak* (*the Daily Server*). But *Agnibinā* being typically a product of a wave of new internationalism that swept over the Bengali intelligentsia in the post-First Communist International, 1921, era, represents a shift in consciousness that is pithily explained by Kris Manjapra: "Bengali intellectual life, framed within a centre-periphery imperial axis in the 1870s was resolutely reframed within a multi-polar international constellation by the 1920s" (Abstract 327). So while the epoch-making "*Bidrohi*" reaches out to the democratic spirit of mankind from the rooted myths and sensibilities and celebrating the birth of the 'new nation,' a series of poems in *Agnibinā*, review the heroics of Islamic fighters in their fight against the post-War imperial conquests of Greece in Constantinople and Turkey – the meeting point of the two halves of the world – and review the East-West relations. This paper focuses on the poem "*Kāmāl Pāshā*," a saga on Pāshā's victory over the Greek army and sacrifice of numerous young Turkish soldiers, and how it extends modernist cosmopolitanism to reconstitute a horizon of liberating humanity beyond any brooding over 'wasteland,' and, on the other hand, establish the intimacy between the victims of Empire across spatiotemporal distances. Nazrul's style and theme mark how the Bengali's confrontation with the ruling *bilāt*– meaning mainly England – gradually moved towards a far wider and freer association with *bidesh* – having a general connotation of 'abroad' – in the second decade of the twentieth century.

Nazrul's early political worldview could be assessed from a collection of editorials, written by him for the periodical *Nabayuga* and published in the book form in 1922 to be immediately banned by the colonial state. In one of these articles, Nazrul discusses the relevance of the anti-British Irish Revolution, Bolshevik Revolution, and Turkish Revolution for the nationalist movement of India. Such an outlook anticipated the

formation of the League against Imperialism in Berlin in 1926 with an objective of consolidating the countries of "Asia, Africa, and Latin America … as the centres of growing labor unrest and anticolonial resistance with global, not local, import" under the leadership of "Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Lamine Senghor of Senegal, Mohammad Hafiz Ramadan of Egypt, Victor Haya de la Torre of Peru, Soong Ching-ling [of China] … and Mohammed Hatta of Indonesia, among others" (Manjapra, *Age* 182-83). While a part of Indian activists tried to utilize the moment of the pan-Islamic Khilafat movement to turn into '*muhajirin*' (fighters from the foreign land) and attempt to liberate India by obtaining support of Soviet Russia only to be arrested at a series of conspiracy cases framed by the colonial rule, the entire movement came to an end in 1922 when Mustafa Kemal Pasha's forces defeated Ottoman authority and established a progressive, secular republic in Independent Turkey. Somewhat like the First World War English poetry, "*Kāmāl Pāshā*"[2] is a sort of instant response to the ongoing historical events. In Pasha's victory, Nazrul could foresee the defeat of the European empire by the common people's force. The poem is written in form of a soldiers' march-song, sung during their homeward journey and their reception by awaiting mass, intersected by prose narratives of the historical setting and military instructions in a generic interplay. Nazrul here introduces a modernist poetic style by his free interchange of Bengali, Urdu, Arabic, Farsi/Persian, and English words and phrases, regional and official speech acts. Eliot in his afore-mentioned introduction to David Jones' war-poem draws attention to the use of the complex network of references in English modernist poetry, and "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" shares the same feature to establish an inspirational relation to history and provide a humanist alternative to the 'heaps of broken images' in the Eurocentric writing. Serving in an auxiliary regiment, Nazrul did not fight in the war itself, and his war-poems, like "*Kāmāl Pāshā*," while evoking inhumanity of the imperialist aggression urges the necessity of people's armed resistance. The poem, however, does not detach itself from the reality of 'the pity of war' and like the "poetry of Sassoon and Owen wrests the male body from the pure from forms of Imagism or the aggressive muscularity of Vorticism into the abject corporeality of the physical world" (Das 71), where every victory is achieved only at the cost of "Young martyr of young blood!" (Islam, *Agnibinā* 41; our translation)

Wyndham Lewis' autobiographical account *Blasting and Bombardiering*, published in 1937, anchors the heyday of the 'High Modernist' experimentalism in the inter-Wars years to the First World War, while suggesting how the heroic-vision of the Men of 1914 – by which Lewis means Eliot, Joyce, Pound, and T.E. Hulme – was fatally foreclosed by the War itself. According to Lewis, the pre-War modernists were "*the first men of a Future that has not materialized*" (256; emphasis in the original). Significantly, *Ulysses'* conformity to an actual locale on an exact date in the pre-War Ireland – Dublin on June 16, 1904 – exposes how reality is very much textual. Against these modernist versions, Nazrul's impassionate fidelity to the history in formation after the First World can be attributed to the conflict between the geopolitical and metaphorical displacements enforced by imperialism, on the one hand, and the anti-imperial attempts to reclaim the world for the suffering mass. To use what Aijaz Ahmad suggests in *In Theory*, "the global resistance" to imperialism is "unevenly developed in different parts of the globe" but it remains "a global phenomenon" (103). In this sense, when the First World War defied H.G. Wells' over-confident claim that it was 'the war that will end war' and was followed by several invasions and stringent colonial rule, Nazrul had to focus on the political contests with the colonial power across the globe. So, the twenty-one years old poet was

deeply touched by the nationalist spirit and political views of the Ottoman army officer Mustafa Kāmāl Pasha and his surprising triumph in the Turkish Liberation War. In Nazrul's early poem "*Ronobheri*" ("The War-Drum"), 1921, the narrator is found to be at awe at the exploits of the Turkish commander much before Pasha's final triumph:

> O come, come along!
> There you can hear the ringing of the weapons!
> Alas, how can one stay away
> And tolerate this disgrace?
> O come, come along! (Islam; translation by Chowdhury)

In poetic articulation Kāmāl is a symbol of both magical heroics and intimate brotherhood, someone people can look up to, as in "*Kāmāl Pāshā*": "what a wonder you've worked! ... Bravo brother!" (191; translation by Huda). Nazrul's admiration for Pasha lies not only in the latter's war against the foreign invaders but also in his successful battle against the oppressor ruler of his country to establish a democratic state. The magic of Kāmāl Pasha is, however, derived from the collective zeal that bears all the loos and suffering in a common fight "[t]o sail over the invading aggressor" (Islam, "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" 191; translation by Huda as well as to get rid of the feudal monarch of the Ottoman Empire:

> We have done it, brother, done it.
> The enemies have fled away on their feet
> And the fort is freed. Why repent?
> Gone is, what is gone. The fort is freed.
> Hurrah Ho! (Islam, "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" 195; translation by Huda)

The availability of cultural resources from around the world to the individual consciousness European intellectual is a historical fact confirmed by the growth of colonialism over the century, and in this respect, as Aijaz Ahmad observes, the so-called 'High Modernism' signals a "real shift" because in its "literary imagination" the ideas of cultural "excess and disruption, unity and fragmentation" are held together "in a tense balance" (128). Now the disillusionment and alienation brought on by the Great War with its implication of a defeated civilization make Eliot to combine the "sense of cultural excess with equally strong invocations of 'Hollow Men' and 'Unreal City'" (Ahmad 129). Thus, it is in contrast to a dualism between cultural manipulations and unbelonging that Nazrul sets his poetics, as in the address "Kāmāl *bhai*" the speaker of "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" relates to his hero in terms of the word intimacy in Bengali vernacular, "*bhai*". Such cultural assimilation remains respectful to individual cultural practices with a sense of integrity to the global unity of the colonized mass against "greedy, malicious … band of devils" (Islam, "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" 194; translation by Huda), that is, the common enemy to mankind:

> Those who loot other's land are plunderers.
> Hence they are destined to receive blows and scars.
> What do you say, comrades of ours?
> Hurrah Ho!
> Hurrah Ho!
> ...
> Not caring for the world, you have shown, for a time,
> Might and strength,

But at the end, you too danced a Turkish dance at our hand.
(Islam, "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" 192; translation by Huda)

The use repeated use of the first person plural number sets the combative tune of the poem and establishes its cosmopolitanism. As a poet-activist for a multicultural and multilingual audience of the twentieth century modernity, Nazrul is one of the first thinkers to claim that the solidarity of the exploited people can only take 'care' of the world by claiming it back from the "plunderers". Such a structure of feeling of attachment manifests itself widely in the anti-imperialist movements across the two World-Wars. For example, the Jew-émigré political theorist Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) sought comradeship to form among subjects of totalitarian states in the post-Second World War period: "WHAT A HISTORY! – A fugitive from Egypt and Palestine, here I am and find help, love, fostering in you people" (49). Significantly, the intersecting prose narratives of "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" enable the reader to experience concretely Pasha's journey: "It was an autumn evening. ... Greek warriors are severely exhausted after the tremendous fight. The majority of their troops are lying dead on the battlefield. The rest of them have started to flee the scene. Kāmāl Pasha, the Turkish National Army's great captain, is now returning to the tent in all his glory" (Islam, *Agnibinā* 31; our translation). The narrative introduction to the verse invites the reader to be attached to the emotional waves of a community: "The hailing of their celebrations was sounding like the roaring of the sea during the earthquake to give off an awful vibe ... Everyone was shivering from happiness. And their eyes welled up with tears of joy" (Islam, *Agnibinā* 31; our translation).

Being poems on the modern warfare Nazrul's "*Anwar*" and "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" – whose refrain, "Left Right Left: Left Right Left./ Left Right Left: Left Right Left," seems to keep the movement of the soldiers described as well as that of the poem's rhythm in order – are distinguished from the poetic invocations of pre-colonial heroes, especially those who fought against Mughal invasions, as part of Indian nationalist discourse. To give an instance, the modern art of soldiery is evidently different from what is described in Rabindranath's "*Bandi Bir*" ("Captive Warrior"), 1899, commemorating the sacrifice of Banda Singh Bahadur (1670-1716) and becoming a *mantra* for the freedom fighters: 'Alakha Niranjan'./ There came a day,/ Thousands of hearts were on their way/ Without any binding or fear,/ Life and death at their feet slaves mere…" (Tagore). Nazrul's poetry is further formed "the richly textured cultural legacy of amative co-living, of vernacular logic or the native tradition of critical hermeneutics", on the one hand, and "the emotive poignance and rebellious self-assertion" of the tortured subject, on the other, as Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha notes in a comparative study of *The Waste Land* and "*Bidrohi*." Nazrul's infusing of one vernacular into another has been well-traced by scholars. But, in this regard, we refer back to Eliot's opinions, as evident in his "The Metaphysical Poets" – a 1921 review of an anthology of 'Metaphysical' verses [3]:

> It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (2565)

What is meant by Eliot by the phrase "[o]ur civilization" in the above piece of writing remains a matter of critical debate, but historical conditions demand that a poet in the colony should relocate cultural signifiers in service of universal humanism. So, Nazrul, being perhaps the first poet in Bengali Literature whose texts forces the reader to consult dictionaries, or footnotes are provided by the poet to mainly introduce foreign expressions for comprehension, remains also emotionally evocative and directly communicative. But, an apparently simple although mostly overlooked example of experiments with speech acts is the use of the name 'Kāmāl' instead of 'Kemal,' which is closer to the Turkish source word. In Nazrul's spelling 'Kāmāl' becomes both a name common among Bengali Muslim boys and a Bengali adverb with a range of meanings, like amazing, bold, admirable, etc. Interestingly, one of the footnotes explains the "*kāmāl kia*" a phrase widely spread across the Middle- and South-East: "used to refer to some unimaginable accomplishment" (Islam, *Agnibinā* 32; our translation). This leads us to appreciate a typical stanza of the poem that opens by congratulating the brave warrior in Urdu ("*sabbash*") and uses Persian "*samshir*" to mean his sword. In the next sentence, while recounting Kamal Pasha's heroic acts, Urdu "*buzdildushman*" – the "coward enemy" – is linked with the Sanskrit name for the god of death, "*Yama.*" Then throughout the stanza he keeps on adding more words and expressions from Hindi ("*duniya*," meaning "world," "*dar*," meaning "fear," and "*khubkiya*," meaning "done well") , Urdu ("*Buzdil*," and "*saaf*") English ("Left Right," and "Hurrah") and keep running the linear story in Bangla using various Bengali verbs like "*boldekhi*," ("please say") "*pathiyedili*" ("sent") etc, thus preserving "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" ultimately as a Bengali Poem (Nazrul, *Agnibinā* 31).

The First World War poet Lesley Coulson's short verse, "War" looks forward to a peaceful post-war life:

> Where was has left its wake of whitened bone,
> Soft stems of summer grass shall wave again,
> And all the blood that war has ever strewn
> Is but a passing stain. (77)

But the marks of a battle are never wiped out from people's experience, even when the battle is fought to save the motherland, as the mechanized nature of modern war links senses of danger and pain: "We shiver seeing the dead" (Islam, "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" 196; Translation by Huda). The prose narrative of "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" tells how soldiers carry the corpses and wounded bodies of their comrades on their soldiers while crossing high-lands. Nazrul poem, like many English First World War literature, shows how the "most immediate and evanescent of human senses, touch could only be preserved in memory and through language" (Das 114): "Sleep on, brothers, sleep on our backs and breasts" (Islam, "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" 197; Translation by Huda). The sorry images of martyrs' brides, beloveds and mothers in the poem – Kāmāl himself is "desperate son of a frenzied mother" (Islam, "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" 191; Translation by Huda) – help to build up emotional bondage with Indian conceptualization of nation as a caring and bereaved woman in a host of cultural productions. And realizations like "To save the country they gave their lives precious" (Islam, "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" 198; Translation by Huda) create a deep affective bond with the motherland of every human being around the world. But maintain its journey pattern, the narrative in a dancing rhythm marches ahead to tell the tale of the triumph of free life amidst death and madness:

> This is all we want, nothing more!

Living means to live, nothing more!
…
Step steadily, move apace
Inclining all your bodies
And waving all your hands!
Moving in quick martial tune, making steps one two three
Let us walk like waves of a sea.
We no more want a paradise even, now that the land is free.
Heaven we don't want, we're free.
(Islam, "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" 195-6; translation by Huda)

It was Rabindranath Tagore who wrote a welcome note in 1922 for the first issue of the *Dhumketu:*

To Qazi Nazrul Islam.
Come, ye comet,
Come to build a bridge of fire across the dark,
Hoist up on the castle top of evil days
Your flag of victory!
Let omens be craved on the forehead of the night,
Awaken, startle those that drowse. (Choudhury 29)

The literary awakening underscored by Nazrul's poetry, with its cosmopolitan style and radical voice, initiated an astonishing range of avant-garde poetry with global reaches in the colonial Bengal from Jibanananda Das's (1899-1954) "*Banalata Sen*" to Sudhindranath Dutta's (1901-1960) "*Utpākhi*" ("The Ostrich") to Sukanta Bhattacharya's (1926-1947) "Lenin". But Nazrul's poetry also signifies a modernist exercise whose intimacy and commitment to the people's movement for liberation challenge the framework of depersonalization prescribed by his contemporary Euro-centric modernism. Towards the conclusion of "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" the speaker of the poem rebukes imperial discourse that fails to give value to lives of colonized mass: "So the writers take pens in praise of pleasure of death/ In one life they tell about one million dead, so I smile, in fact" (Islam, "*Kāmāl Pāshā*" 197; Translation by Huda). The speaker's wish to kiss Kāmāl's hand is, therefore, part of an ethical responsibility to establish human touch across the imperial borders. Readings of the poems of *Agnibinā* for a century have continued this ethical task to stand for humanist causes in face of all forms of totalitarian invasions.

Notes

[1]A number of organs were published from 1922 to 1925: *The Socialist* was launched by *Shripad* Amrit *Dange* in 1922 from Mumbai; *Inqilab* was launched by Gulam Hussain in 1922 from Lahore. The *Labour Kishan Gazette was started by the trade-union leader Singaravelu Chettiar in 1923. And Nazrul* and his lifelong associate communist leader *Muzaffar Ahmad* started the *Langol* in 1925.
[2]For the sake of interpretation this essay refers to both the Bengali source text in *Agnibinā*, and the English translation.
[3]*Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*, 1921, edited by J.C. Grierson.

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