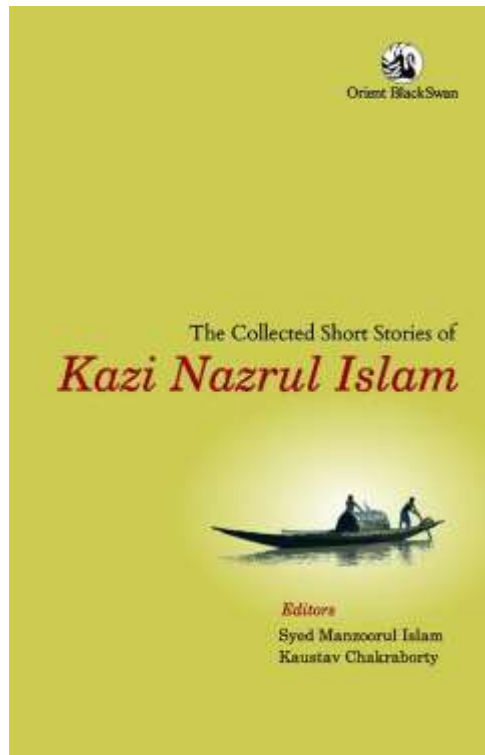


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Shyamasri Maji 7 August 2024 Fiction

“The Collected Short Stories of Kazi Nazrul Islam”



The Collected Short Stories of Kazi Nazrul Islam,

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Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), aka “Dukhu Mia” and known as the “rebel poet” of the Bengalis, was born in Churulia, a village in the Bardhaman district of West Bengal. A litterateur, lyricist, revolutionary, communist and freedom fighter, he was declared the national poet of Bangladesh in 1987. These *Collected Short Stories* are a joint endeavour of editors and translators from India and Bangladesh.

Nazrul’s literary genius is often compared with that of Rabindranath Tagore, Asia’s first Nobel laureate. But unlike Tagore, who belonged to an aristocratic family, Nazrul had a humble rural background. His experiences of poverty, struggle and imprisonment not only fashioned his creative outlook but also set it apart from that of the urban Bengali writers of his time. Though Tagore’s opinion that “Nazrul tried to shave with a sword” was seconded in Kolkata elite circles, Nazrul’s fiery spirit, as suggested by the book’s editors, “needs to be understood in terms of the politics of marginalisation.”

Nazrul’s short stories offer a close view of his thoughts on marginalization resulting from the class, caste and gender hierarchies in the Bengali Muslim society during the colonial period. Set in West Bengal and Bangladesh, the stories broadly represent the Bengali-speaking region of South Asia. His characters, mostly villagers, are destitute. Their speech is a cultural and linguistic hybrid representing the local Bengali idioms and the pan-Islamic nuances of the Arab world. The stories also highlight the influence of minority Hindu and Muslim sects such as Vaishnavism and Sufism on the life and literature of this region. Since Nazrul himself had been to the warfront as a soldier in the British Indian Army, there are war references in some of these stories: the soldiers in them fight not only physically with enemies but also mentally against their own dilemmas and faults.

The book's twenty stories are divided into four sections—"Harvest of Sorrow" "The Agony of the Destitute" "The Shiuli Mala" ("The Garland of Shiuli") and the shortest with just two stories, "Unanthologised Stories". Most examine the sufferings of their main characters. Social inequality, plight of women, inner conflict and compassion are the major themes in Nazrul's stories. "Rakshasi", "The Widow" and "Letter from a Lost Boy" deal with discrimination and the injustices faced by women in the family and the community circles.

The Bengali word "rakshasi" means "demoness". However, the English does not fully convey the implications of the word as it is used in the Birbhum district of West Bengal where the story is set. The story was originally written in the dialect of the Bagdis, an oppressed caste who were once upon a time hailed as warriors. The protagonist, a woman who has been castigated by the village community as a "rakshasi", narrates the story in first person. While a man's moral lapses are usually overlooked in a patriarchal society, a woman's rage is always viewed as a transgression: the villagers consider her as an incarnation of evil and stay away from her. The circumstances leading to her social exclusion had stemmed from her husband's extra-marital affair. Unable to tolerate his unfaithfulness, the protagonist killed him. Neither the ordeals of prison nor repentance set her free from the social stigma of being a "rakshasi".

"The Widow" describes the exploitation of a woman by her in-laws after the untimely death of her husband. Because Begum, the protagonist-cum-narrator of this story, belonged to an underprivileged family, her marriage with a groom from the upper caste Syed line did not meet with the approval of neighbours and relatives. The death of her husband provided them an opportunity to reverse the rise in status her marriage has brought her.

Nazrul sketched his women characters in various shades, but his portrayal of Zohra in “The Lotus-Cobras” is unique for its ecological concerns. Zohra’s maternal love for two deadly snakes, who, as it was believed, guarded the family treasure trove of her in-laws’ house, adds an ecofeminist twist to the story.

“Harvest of Sorrow” , “In Relentless Rain” , “Half Asleep” , “The Shiuli Mala” and “The Volcano” , on other hand, are about unrequited love: passion, sacrifice, repentance, acceptance and forgiveness conveyed with poetry and musicality. The protagonists exhibit a desperation to purge the soul of carnal desires and to pursue passionate love as a spiritual quest.

The translations, from a wide variety of different translators, are on the whole smooth and all the stories read well. The English translations of popular Bengali idioms in these stories have been rendered skilfully. Certain Bengali words of address in the conversations of women, such as “bon” (younger sister), “didi” (elder sister) and “devata” (god; husband) convey the colloquial tenor. The gaps in capturing the minute details of cultural tempo and dialect are mitigated through translators’ footnotes and editors’ comprehensive critical introduction to the book.

These stories introduce a non-native reader to the multicultural setting of the Bengali-speaking world and go far to correct the relative lack of attention that the short stories of Nazrul have received from scholars and translators.