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Contextualizing Kazi Nazrul Islam's *Bartaman Visva Sahitya* in the 'World' of World Literature

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Abstract

World literature is conceptualized and captured within different temporalities in contemporary conjecture. In January 1827, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe first conceptualized the term *Weltliteratur* in a conversation with his disciple Johann Peter Eckermann about Chinese novels to understand the upcoming possibilities of the nature of world literature. On the other hand, contemporary critics - David Damrosch, Pheng Cheah, and Baidik Bhattacharya - have started critiquing the term to locate current paradigms of world literature in their respective writings. Based on their arguments, this study would investigate the different conceptual forces of world literature embedded in their respective writings. They argued that the existing concept of world literature is not worldly enough and proposed alternative concepts of world literature to actualize the idea across the universe's geographical, political, social, and economic boundaries. Borrowing these critics' opinions, this paper tends to investigate the works of a particular regional author named Kazi Nazrul Islam, who is considered the *Bidrohi Kobi* ('Rebel Poet') of West Bengal, a state of India. This paper would study the cohesive nature of Nazrul's *Bartaman Visva Sahitya* ('Contemporary Literature') in the light of David Damrosch, Pheng Cheah, and Baidik Bhattacharya's writings which disseminate the sense of inclusivity and push the limit of worldliness in world literature.

Keywords: World, Literature, Cohesiveness, Inclusivity, Paradigms, Critique

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of world literature once again got attention in the late 1990s. The publication of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in 1997, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* which was discussed in Oprah's Book Show in New York in 2000, and *The Kite Runner* of Khaled Hosseini are some of the best-known books worldwide. And the most intriguing factor is that all these books are from developing countries. However, their uprising in the mainstream world is because of economic growth. The idea of world literature got popularity among literary scholars, especially in 1999 with the publication of the *World Republic of Letters* by French critic Pascale Casanova and Franco Moretti's *Conjectures on World Literature* in 2000. The cartographical boundary of literary sensibility has turned up while the remarkable economic growth touches the developing countries more than the developed ones. For world literature, the centre of attention has changed from the northern part to the southern part of the world. This transformation of the literary world also brings a drastic change in the economic sector. The important novelists are Orhan Pamuk, Haruki Murakami, and many more who "transcend their homelands and emerge into a planetary system" (The Editors, 2013) where their work can achieve universal acceptance as well as strengthen the national boundaries and languages.

The economic sector plays a crucial role in the process of selecting literary texts all over the world. The economically developed countries began to control the other countries to maintain their supremacy in all sectors. At First, economic prosperity came in Italy, and it started to regulate the development of international finance in the 15th century. After that, the

headquarters of capitalism got shifted from Italy to Holland, then England, and finally to the US. These countries were mainly the residents of Protestants who were different from the Catholics. The Catholics were the representative of the common mass in the universe. These capitalist countries sometimes gathered to discuss the distribution procedure of finance. Geographically specific texts could reach far away from their production house, but their socio-economical effect was thin and opaque in myriad layers of society. For example, *One thousand and One Night* in Middle East countries, 'Sanskrit' in India, *Vulgate* in England – though all of these texts reached out to many countries across the universe, the impact was very low.

Goethe speaks out in a *Conversation with Eckerman* in 1827, “National literature is now a rather insignificant term; the epoch of the world literate is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.” What Goethe mentioned in 1827 has been proved wrong in translation. Translation cannot evoke the same meaning, and there is always a disjunction between modern and postmodern poetry. Moreover, the idea of a modern nation-state is implemented within defined borders to standardize national languages. The writings within this territory are only for the compatriot audience. However, few young people wanted to ruin the “imagined community” (The Editors, 2013) wall with their thoughts. For example, Shelley in England, Turgenev in Russia, Flaubert in France, Mazzini in Italy, and Herzen in Russia started their revolution for world unification. Eleanor Marx did a great job translating the significant text *Madame Bovary* into English for the first time. So, translation also plays a crucial role in spreading the texts worldwide. Then French was the language of diplomacy in the 17th century and remained the same until World War II. Paris was the world capital for two centuries.

Another way of emerging modern literature is to radically institutionalize it in the nation-state, in “an atmosphere of threatened revolution to reorder” (The Editors, 2013). In the 19th century, the theory of naturalism drastically changed the images of rising social classes and ruined individuals. Franco Moretti called literary modernism the “last literary season of Western culture.” The national phenomenon became more and more international. The most effective part of modernism was the coerciveness between the familiar and nonfamiliar in the same status. The rise of South Asian literature gradually became visible in the postmodern era while Europe departed after World War II. The emergence was possible as they had the publishing houses of northern capitals. The social situation had gradually been changing through reading. The ruling class divided society into the bourgeoisie and working classes. An extra force was created by the unrest between these two classes in the colonized countries. This force instigated the inertia of the writers to criticize the comprador bourgeoisie in the south Asian countries. Ngugi wa Thiongo, V.S. Naipaul, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Salman Rushdie tried effortlessly in their writings to answer the advent of newness into the world.

The genealogy of the emergence of world literature is somehow related to the history of war. The war happened to acquire the capital and control of the whole world. Literature has also been shifting since the changes in the strategies of the war day by day. What Marx and Engels prophesized on World Literature in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848): “National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and out of the many national and local literature, a world literature arises” is confronted by world literature today to fulfill the hopeful –sounding prophecy.

The term ‘world literature’ might be called global literature. Salman Rushdie, J.M. Coetzee, Kiran Desai, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are the vanguards of world literature. Several literary festivals, book fairs, and prestigious literary awards (Noble Prize, Man

Booker Prize, PEN) bring the global academic elites into contact. Institution, especially university, plays a vital role in producing world literature. Literary festivals and commercial publishing houses are not enough to create the academic world. In every world, literature writers engage in different universities. For example, Pamuk teaches in Colombia, Paul Muldoon at Princeton, Spivak in Colombia, etc. Derek Walcott beautifully articulates, “I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I am nobody, or I’m a nation” in *The Schooner Flight* in 1979. He teaches at Boston University. The universities started hiring and promoting writers from the global south. Working as guest workers, their employment in the universities depends on a permanently foreign identity. These foreign writers are transformed into professional experts. So, universities are gradually becoming the basic to the careers of young writers. Rushdie and Naipaul are exceptional in this context. They are not very much attached to any of the universities.

EXITING TRAJECTORIES OF WORLD LITERATURE

Literature by default is an identical figure seeking the readers’ association to explore the regional narratives from ‘the clammy cells of provincialism’ (The Editors, 2013, p.1). It connects people with their different histories, cultures, and ideas embedded in various forms of activities in different languages across the globe. This notion was a myth in the early centuries. The ubiquitous nature of literature is very much associated with the progress of global capitalism. In the late 15th century, the prime motif of many countries, mainly Italy, Holland, and England, was the circulation of money, which Marx refers to as ‘universal equivalent,’ to make a ‘capitalist world-system’ (The Editors, 2013, p.2) and the result was the publications fashioned in local languages. A few texts – *The Thousand and One Nights*, *Vulgate*, *Texts of Sanskrit Literature* – circulated across geographical boundaries. These texts were the common property of the literate people. Later, the concept of world literature came into existence with the notion of *Weltliteratur* by Goethe, who said in 1827, “I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men...” (Goethe, Eckermann, 1835).

This method of reading has been critiqued and sometimes rejected as it is lost in translation. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the idea of world literature was not welcomed; instead, national literature was always prioritized. The British diplomat Lord Chesterfield clearly defined the term “*illiterate* meant someone who didn’t know Latin and Greek” (The Editors, 2013, p. 4). Few nations (England, France, US) with their national languages have ruled over literature in terms of establishing the nationalization of literature. This nationalization has set the administrative process within the defined territory.

RECENT CRITICAL TEMPLATES OF WORLD LITERATURE

Damrosch, in his book *What Is World Literature?* claims that world literature is not infinite and is not an ungraspable canon of works. It is a mode of circulation and reading. If one wants to understand the principle of world literature, one needs different sets of reading that can be appropriate to all texts. “The variability of a work of world literature is one of the main constitutive features” (Damrosch, 2003, p. 5) and the greatest strengths of that work. One of the main features of world literature is variability, where different scholars will be obsessed by the very different constellations of texts. World literature is a nascent idea that is in the process of making. Damrosch has extensively described classical literature and unnoticed modern texts worldwide. After demonstrating the literature of different countries, Damrosch has set threefold definitions: At first, “world literature is elliptical refraction of

national literature. Secondly, world literature is writing that gains in translation. Finally, world literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of separate engagement with worlds beyond our place and time.” (Damrosch, 2003, p. 281)

Baidik Bhattacharya, in his book *The Postcolonial Writing in the Era of World Literature: Text, Territories, and Globalizations* (2019), foregrounds an entirely different perspective of world literature. It deals with an argument raised from two current literary fields: Postcolonial Literature Studies and World Literature Studies. These two academic fields redefine the codes and territories of existing literature with their primary coordinates canonical and anthropological. It tries to relocate the notion of world literature in the history of postcolonial writing. The recent ‘reincarnation’ (Bhattacharya, 2019, p.1) of the idea of world literature has been theorized by critics like David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, and Pascale Casanova depending on the colonial and postcolonial histories. Bhattacharya states, “Postcoloniality is the prehistory of the present celebration of the world literature” (Bhattacharya, 2019, p. 1). The argument is narrated in this book in two different ways – the first strand is the close reading of the well-known author of world literature like Rudyard Kipling. Their writings (considered as Anglophone world literature) are based on the ‘structures and textures of the empire’ (Bhattacharya, 2019, p. 1). The second is capturing the energy of the changing nature of world literature in the writings of the postwar Anglophone authors like V.S.Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, J.M.Coetzee, and others. The canonization of postcolonial writing within the framework of world literature invokes its reader to rethink both these illustrations through the interlocking of texts, territories, and globalization.

THE COHESIVENESS OF NAZRUL’S *BARTAMAN VISVA SAHITYA*

The essay, *Bartaman Visva Sahitya*, has been narrativized in a way where world-making trajectories are solidified to actualize it, and the inclusivity of western and non-western literature reflects in it. The key concern of his essay lies in the forces of literature. He admits that the cohesive nature of the literature is the permanent solution to wipe out the gloomy darkness. He uses mythical allusions to contextualize the relationship between Global capitalism and literary globalization. He observes,

Capitalists have been devouring like the Ravana with ten heads and have been stealing with twenty hands and along with their keepers termed Hanuman, they are still not satisfied. These greedy people say that the Sitas of the earth are to be enjoyed by the best people on the planet. When the Hanumans go to save Sita, the sentry ignites his tail. Then Hanuman jumps upon Sita and says, ‘If I am to burn with fire in my tail, then I shall burn all your gold ornaments too.’ (Nashid Kamal, 2018, p.36)

In this passage, Nazrul critiques the power of capitalist forces. He also describes the power of literature as Hanuman, which can stand against this global giant. In his essay, Nazrul pronounces his idea on world literature. While Goethe proclaims his concept in Germany and demands Germans’ active contribution to world literature, Nazrul in India contributes to the Indians with his notion of *Bartaman Visva Sahitya* (‘Contemporary Literature’) in a different way. Nazrul does not provide any particular definition of the idea of world literature. He plays an essential role in understanding the world in his literary work. His understanding of it is exciting and influential in proliferating the sense of transnationalism across the globe. He transfers his ‘self’ while he engages with the writing of the different authors of the other countries.

His readings are divided into two segments. Firstly, he selects a few texts which soar high in the sky and look for heaven. The works of Shelly and Milton are the texts through which he can fly higher and higher in search of the heavenly song. The other part embraces the dusty

earth with great affection. It means the works he dealt with are grounded and connected with the deprived masses. His grounds that “it embraces this dusty earth with great affection-just as a frightened child clasps his mother on a dark night, just as the tree clings to the soil with thousands of roots, a loving son of the soil.” (Kamal, 2018, p.34) Through this imagery, he attributes the world literature as mother and all the national literature is her sons. When sons are frightened and look at the gloomy sky, they embrace their mother. The time has come for all kinds of literature to embrace the world to form their worldly habitation. He pleads, “It is not that this mud-clad child does not acknowledge beauty or not want the heaven. If there is a heaven then he wishes to bring heaven to earth. Our world has always been enslaved at its feet, now we shall make it the slave of the earth.” (Kamal, 2018, p. 34) The concept of world literature is biased in nature.

People of Eurocentric nations germinate the thoughts of their superiority in every sector. The notion of world literature is part of their culture. They spread the news of worldliness based on their literary works. They do not prefer to place the literature in European countries. The sound of their understanding of the world is skeptical. Nazrul regrets and also focuses on that point. He suggests European literature is heaven. The non-European literature is related to earth. This is the task of the earthly literature valorized as dusty challenge to bring down their fashionable status. This literature has been enslaved, and they are enthusiastic about making a relationship with heaven. Nazrul articulates, “This is the pride of the demon, and the drunkenness of the beast. These are the mutterings of the elite, the lowliness of the greedy.” (Kamal, 2018, p. 34) The struggle between the elite literature and lower literature, the European and non-European literature has continued centuries after centuries. Having realized the vibe of this struggle, Nazrul makes a comparison. The literature of capitalist countries is prioritized worldwide because of their cultural richness. They assume the economically deprived nations are also poor in their culture, in their merits, morally and ethically. These cultural imbalances have been spread worldwide to identify them as inferior and deprived.

Nazrul proposes to compare the stalwarts on both sides “On the one hand we have the dreamers Noguchi, Yeats, Rabindranath Tagore, and others. On the other hand, are Gorky, Johan Bojer, Bernard Shaw, Benavente and others.” (Kamal, 2018, p. 34) Gorky, Johan Bojer, Bernard Shaw, and Benavente are associated with the downtrodden people and reflect their oppressed lives. On the other hand, he mentions ‘Gorky, Johan Bojer, Bernard Shaw, and Benavente’ who embrace the realities attached to the ground. In contemporary literature, both are essential to gain prominence. Nazrul was a representative of them. Based on the comparison between the two extremes in which he “sheds tears at the sorrow of the princes in the fairy tale. He gets ready to ride the mythical flying horse and free her. He loves his earthly mother, but has no grudge against heaven. He sings his sad song alone at home, rendering bits to his mother. Unlike his brothers, he doesn’t throw fistfuls of tear-dampened soil at heaven in anger.” (Kamal, 2018, p. 35) This vision of togetherness is portrayed in order to make a connection between heaven and earth. The earth is the representative of the world where all the nations live together following their literary exchange. Nazrul envisages, “We want an end to this sadness and sorrow. The reforms will emerge not from evolution, but through blood bathed revolution. We need to make overall changes and create new. We shall strive and our perseverance will bring a new creator and new creations.” (Kamal, 2018, p. 35) How does the literature emerge from daily circumstances? How does the literature constitute its literary globalization? The reply to these questions lies in every word of each sentence. Nazrul makes it possible to collect all tortures and all happiness within one frame. He describes a world with his feelings, with his ethico-political entity. He depicts Crime and

Punishment in a way where characters become alive. “Roskolnikov seemed like sad, angry face of Dostoyevsky himself. And Sonia the representative of raped Russia.” (Kamal, 2018, p. 37)

World literature is not a rosy bed of national literature. Most parts are always oppressed. What Goethe and Rabindranath envision is a culmination of romantic imagination. He again cries, looking at “the entire world was grief-stricken and awed to see the Roskolnikov falling at the feet of the ever caring Sonia and saying, ‘I bow down not to thee, but to suffering humanity in you.’” (Kamal, 2018, p. 37) The world Nazrul envisions is full of sufferings associated with crushed lives. He manages to engage with those rebellious attitudes. His soul cries out, listening to the sadness of Merezhkovsky, imaging the ‘distorted face of Pushkin, one of the best poets of this world, hanging from the noose’ (Kamal, 2018, p. 36) across the sea. He brings forth names of Dostoyevsky to share the sufferings of the oppressed, referring to Maxim Gorky as a friend of a storm. Gorky influences all over Russia. Karl Marx, Nazrul alludes to him as a ‘Hermit’, and changes the economy with his words. “The economic theories of Karl Marx have fallen into the hands of the magicians and transformed into world theories. The piles of stones have turned into a beautiful Taj Mahal. Like the faded glow of the morning, the beauty of the Taj has enthralled the world.” (Kamal, 2018, p. 38)

Bartaman Visva Sahitya is enriched by including the different nations and connecting them with the writing of his country. The works of Hamsun, Boyer of Norway are very similar to the Upanishad. “The character Swan in Boyer’s Great Hunger reminds us of the character Anondo from the Upanishad. In Hamsun’s Growth of the Soil, we find a similar character and praises like the sages in the Vedas.” (Kamal, 2018, p. 38) Russia, Norway, and Scandinavia have given the people tears, and sighs of misery that impart us from unbearable pain. He again starts to critique the people like Bernard Shaw, Anatole France, and Jacinto Benavente. He quotes from their writings to portray their characters. Nazrul’s world thus is the embellishment of sorrow and joy. All the collective imaginations are put together in order to shape a world where European and non-European, elite and poor, oppression and liberation posit together. Nazrul’s *Bartaman Visva Sahitya* (‘Contemporary Literature’) demonstrates the notion of planetarity worldwide. His ideas of the world are unique in that way. Later, he finds few authors who “listen to stories of heaven while lying upon his earthly mother’s breast” (Kamal, 2018, p. 35). Leonid Andreev, Knut Hamsun, Wladyslaw Remont, and others are referred. In the middle of the essay, concepts of destruction and resurrection are addressed to highlight the upcoming reformation of the path of revolution. He portrays the ‘capitalists’ and their greedy tentacles and compares them with our great mythical figure, ‘Ravanas with ten heads.’

He enlists Tolstoy, Chekov, Basuki from Arab World, Karl Marx, Knut Hamson, and Johan Boyer from Norway as mentor, as a realist. Suddenly he becomes confused looking at him. Does he transcend his soul to listen to the soul of the others? As Rabindranath Tagore conveys a message in understanding oneself in the soul of others in his essay *Visva Sahitya*, Nazrul does the same while he asserts, “My eyes close as I listen. In the dusty earth, I fall asleep listening to the praises of beauty and aspire for the new sun in the new morning. In my dreams, I listen to the Bulbul Birds of Persia, the whistle of the camel driver in Arab, the beautiful candle-like bodies of the veiled women of Turkey” (Kamal, 2018, p. 40). Being a prominent Bengali poet Nazrul constitutes an essay focusing on contemporary literature where Nazrul freely engaged the prolific authors and their ideas of his own time to deliver the message of worlding to his people across the world. He tries to ground the differences between the dream and the ‘soil’ (Kamal, 2018, p. 34). By ‘soil,’ he means the ground

embracing the ‘dusty earth with great affection’ (Kamal, 2018, p. 34). Nazrul’s ‘Contemporary World’ is full of intertextual references that ignite the realm of thought to delve deep into the current situations throughout the world. This paper explores the trans-self of Nazrul, who refuses to accept literary oppression. He does not believe in the colonization of the mind rather he prescribes the decolonization of the mind that can create a world of literariness.

CONCLUSION

Nazrul’s *Bartaman Visva Sahitya* (‘Contemporary Literature’) unearths many segments of world literature in terms of extending its limitations. World Literature and its existing and recent theories are becoming challenging in changing its trajectories and exploring its possible tendencies to find its own inclusive power. What Goethe popularized once in 1827 has been countering and re-countering to expand the definition of the literature, especially world literature. The texts which are not visible in the mainstream literary arena are needed to explore and acknowledge their importance in the world of world literature not only as mere texts but as the texts of world literature.

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