



The Cacophony of Songbirds: A Potpourri of Voices in the Birdsongs of Kazi Nazrul Islam's Lyrics and English Romantic Poetry

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Abstract

In spite of its conventional reception as an aesthetic catalyst in the romanticization of beauty, the idea of songbirds in verses is occasionally fed with alternate and wider perspectives - in my paper, I have tried to elucidate this, by exploring the multifaceted voices of songbirds found in the lyrics of Kazi Nazrul Islam and in the poems of English Romantic poets. The songs that seem invaluable to the commoners are the food for the bards. The birdsongs add meaning to the multiple atypical abstractions that are harbored in the creative minds. This paper intends to explore the interpretations of the songs by the most vocal agent of nature – the songbirds. Songbirds have offered insights about new methods of rebellion, enlightenment about the states of existence, the eye to seek, an idea about the range of possibilities inherent in nature and life, and many more to the composers. The following passages will also explore an image born in the minds of the composers, that illustrates the superiority of the birdsongs. It will also unfold the impressions of their imagination of the parallel universe that is the abode of the songbirds. The paper argues that the unfathomable birdsongs claim the ultimate voice in life.

Keywords: Kazi Nazrul Islam, Nazrulgeeti, English Romantic Poetry, Songbirds.

Dukhumiyan (1) is widely known for being the '*bidrohi*' or Rebel poet. Although readers subscribe to the idea of resistance against the colonial rule over Bengal and India as his predominant impetus for protest Kazi Nazrul Islam's voice of rebellion stands for a range of issues. He is widely venerated as a lyricist and a composer of music. He has left behind a whole new genre in Bengali music by his name - Nazrul Geeti. This genre of music created by Nazrul Islam is revolutionary. It is something that Bengal hadn't witnessed so profoundly up till then. Being an amalgamation of traditional classical music and mainstream Bengali music, Nazrul Geeti is a form of *Raag-angik* (2) songs and Ghazals (3) authentic to Bengal. He composed his songs upon different Ragasⁱ (4), and the lyrics that he offered to the songs were equally revolutionary as the music. The lyrics of Nazrul Geeti spoke of rebellion, of all the kinds that the lyricist wanted to voice.

O youthful Shiva,
low your horn of universal cataclysm!
Let the flag of destruction
rise amidst the rubble of prison walls
of the East!! (Islam, 1999, p.128)

These lyrics are a prototype of the 'Protest songs' by Nazrul Islam that invoke the spirit of insurgence in the youth of the colonized nation. Many of Nazrul's compositions raise voices

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against the 'Prison' - a common abode for revolutionaries under British rule. The Prison can be metaphorically treated as the life in their very own motherland, where prisonlike restrictions and tortures were imposed by the usurpers. Nazrul Islam composed his lyrics to speak about multiple other objectives too. There are several Nazrul Geetis composed by him that are odes to Goddess *Shyama* or Goddess *Tara* of the Hindu Pantheon; these are the '*Shyama Sangeets*' - and this was probably why he was addressed as 'Tara Khyapa', or a lunatic singing the songs of Goddess *Tara*. All such practices are ways by which he displayed his rejection of religious and communal prejudices, which forms another crucial aim of his lyrics. He voiced his songs against the growing cleft between the Hindu and Muslim communities. He sang about his displeasure with the crosscurrents of the society he lived in, and through his songs, he wanted to instill a sense of resistance and enlightenment in his fellow members of the society. His lyrics, bearing the voice of protests, were also abundant in aesthetics. He moved a few steps forward to compose lyrics that fused the two aspects - Rebellion and Aesthetics. His lyrics present a vivid picture of nature and its agents, romanticizing the same. However, through those illustrations, Nazrul Islam delivers wider perspectives, and in doing so, he employs the songbirds in a superior role. The songbirds are given agency and a voice that speaks of the matters relating to their own habitat. Their voices also speak on behalf of the lyricist, narrating his personal experiences alongside his take on multiple societal issues. Their position in the lyrics and their voice are visibly prioritized by the lyricist. Harping on the influence of the songbirds in his lyrics, he tries to spread its significance and also the insight about the superiority of their voice as an organ of nature, among the people.

Nazrul's distinctive approach of including songbirds in his lyrics enhances his trait of rebellion. The songbirds that are commonly used as a tool of aesthetics are received and presented as the symbol of revolution by the lyricist. His first move that breaks the convention, is the removal of the authority of resistance from humans and bestowing it upon the songbirds. Following so, he consecutively wields this device to speak against the multiple societal issues that disturb him. In Nazrul Islam's lyrics, the songbirds assume vitality as he uses them to thrust his rebellion. The poet includes the aerial creatures in the regular lives of the humans and gives them the responsibility of singing about the hoarded emotions of humankind. Most of his lyrics are pathetic fallacies - lyrics where he has meticulously employed nature and its choicest agent, the songbirds to speak on behalf of himself. Although there are two recognizable voices in the lyrics - one of the lyricists himself and another, of the songbirds, talking about the same objectives. Nazrul Islam conceives that strong emotions can only be emoted justly by the songbirds. The unity between the songbirds and the other facet of nature has greater power of conveying the strong emotions, as compared to the scattered human voices "The Koyeliaan still cries in the woods, The Bhramaras are buzzing around the Champa Flower - the Papihaans are cooing." - Nazrul Islam composes these lyrics around the nocturnal raga *Hambir*, to project his views about the love, that lingers even after separation and the wait of the lover for the return of their beloved. The songbirds in this song are lamenting the separation unitedly with the other objects of nature and this unity is their strength - this is what our composer covets. An additional understanding of this idea can be found in another lyric by Nazrul Islam, where he mentions, that "'Piyaaan Piyaaan', cries the Papihaan from my heart's rib cages." - His sorrow finds its voice only through the voice of the *Papihaan*, as they can convey the right intensity of his sorrow, even better than he himself can. His novelty and resistance lie in the process, where he offers a superior rank to his songbirds, above human voices. In some of his lyrics, he has also discussed the silence of the songbirds - when the *Bulbuli* falls silent in the *Nargis* forest, it signifies not just separation, but also the premonition of an end that he mentions closely afterward - The end of love for the poet whose partner has died. These are a few instances where he has shown how the songbirds are the singers of the soul. He expresses his faith in the united songbirds and disbelief in the withdrawn and conflicting humans, reprimanding them. Alongside being communicators of emotions, his songbirds were also a vital voice challenging irrational societal practice. Another primary issue

of societal context that Nazrul's songbirds sing against is the communal disharmony in India.

He was one of the greatest spokespersons for the Hindu-Muslim unity that he felt was immensely vital for challenging the external superpowers. He recognized the decay that the Britons were intending to create by igniting the friction between the two communities. Thereby, he felt it was imperative that he raise his voice against this growing cleft and attempted to unify the two communities. "Nazrul's works are full of parallel reference to Kokil (Cuckoo) and Bulbul (Nightingale), the two birds symbolizing, respectively, Hindu/Indian context and Muslim/Persian context" (Farooq, 1999, p.3). A vast number of his lyrics have mentions of the *Bulbul*, and parallelly, another large section of the lyrics has *Papihaan*, or the *Koel* in it. The bird-name *Bulbul* is of Persian origin, and it can be said that it is especially for the relevance of the Bengali Muslim population who was also familiar with the Persian-Arabic tongue, that Nazrul Islam had implanted it in his songs. On the contrary, *Papihaan*, *Koyeliaan*, or *Koel* are relevant to the Hindi and Bengali-speaking Hindu population. This thought of introducing the words of Persian and Arabic origin can be counted as one of his unique attempts with lyrics. The influence behind it can be his immense knowledge of Hafiz and Rumi, and besides so, his urge to stir the course of literature towards secularism acted as another prime influence. "The Bulbuli is silent in the Nargis Forest." - A Gazal by Nazrul Islam elucidating the tale of a lovelorn lover. The use of words such as *Nargis* forest which translates to the Daffodil Forest adds to his tendency of adding words of Persian-Arabic origin in his songs. Parallelly, we find him writing the lyrics for another song around raga Lalit - "'Piyu Piyu' sings the sad Papihaan." where we find him expressing similar conditions through the songs of a *Papihaan*. A lot of his romantic lyrics deal with the sorrow of lost love and the songbirds act as voices communicating them to the audience. In two different songs, around the same theme of lamenting lovers, Nazrul Islam mentions the *Bulbul* in one and the *Papihaan* in another, proving that all communal barriers break when it comes to a loveless life. Nazrul Islam intends to promote inclusivity through the literature that he composes. He promotes the message that, in Nature, there aren't any rules of community or religion, all creatures resort to unrestrained expressions of their feelings. The names and tags exclusive to human society are powerless. "In some cases, his writing reflects the thinking and nature of the second generation of the romantic poets" (Deb and Islam, 2013, p.2)- Nazrul Islam's reception of songbirds especially, finds semblance with the reception of songbirds observed in the poems of the English Romantic poets

Another clan that has been influenced widely by Songbirds is the clan of English Romantic poets. In multifarious roles, the songbirds have been a consistent presence in poetry born during the English romantic period. The Romantic period commenced with the debris of a traumatic past - "The Romantic period witnessed enormous political and social upheaval with such political events and social processes as the American and French Revolutions, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the prosecution and criticism of the transatlantic slave trade, the Great Reform Act of 1832, the Industrial Revolution, and much more" (Kitson, p.1). All victims of this catastrophic Europe were suffocated and traumatized, and so were the bards of the world. The poets suffered from social incoherence and restlessness, and this urged them to be in quest of another world that would be different from their reality. At this juncture, the revolutionary Romantic movement was born, which conceived a very different role for nature in their compositions and in their visions too. The Romantic poets rejected the traditional ways of poetry writing that had percolated from the preceding eras - The society around them was already suffocating them with its actions, thereby, the poets denied to further restrict their natural poetic instincts and followed the free flow of emotions for composing their verses. Wordsworth in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* expressed, "The principal object then which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature". The Romantics received nature and its many facets in novel ways, and their conclusions about the same were fundamentally different from their predecessors. Nature was a respite for them, an escape from the cruel realities of their society. Songbirds have procured a perennial space in the Romantic

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poems be it in the compositions of the elder poets of the periods such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, or the younger ones such as Shelly and Keats. "If poets can be considered singing birds, birds can be considered composing poets" (Doggett, 1974, p.550)- the singing birds as an agent of nature were often treated as the counterparts of the poets, or the singing Bards. Oerlemans points out, "poets have always done this, that this topos is rooted in myth and deep history" (Oerlemans, 2018, p.2), and several other scholars too have conjectured that this tradition of including songbirds in poetry as a reflection of the poet's voice has been practiced since very long in English Literature. Following this tradition, romantic poets too have often used the voices of the songbirds to vocalize the range of their thoughts. Poets have also treated them as muses in their poetry. However, in the juncture of the Romantic period, the songbirds were essentially treated as superior voices belonging from another universe, aware of graver realities of the world. The poems suggest that the fallen humankind should take the guidance offered by the songbirds and emulate them in order to live as harmoniously as them. It can be said that the Romantic poets lived two lives - in their suffering reality and partially in the utopian world of the songbirds.

The Socio-Political background plays a vital role in shaping the temperaments of the compositions during the English Romantic period. From a common overview of the romantic poems, it can be conjectured that the poets mostly remained confused about the whereabouts of the songbirds - they looked up to them as celestial and mystical creatures having mysterious abilities, singing songs that are impeccable. Their community is conjectured to be a parallel universe for human society. It is a utopian world contrary to the dystopian reality. Their quest for an alternate land devoid of suffering, coupled with the expression of free emotions drew them closer to Nature, and all things that Nature had to give. One of the reappearing ideas articulated by the poets of this period in their verses is the picture of the realities of humankind.

The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow. (Keats, p.36)

Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' is a graphic articulation of the ills of the flesh. It mentions the physical as well as the emotional diseases suffered by humankind, the decay that is inevitable to humans, and its all-inclusive nature. From the poem, it can be understood that these physical and psychic ailments spring out of the innate corruption existing in the people. As an apt continuation of this stream of thought from Keats's poetry, we can collect an extract from Shelly's 'To a Skylark'. "We look before and after, / And pine for what is not: / Our sincerest laughter / With some pain is fraught; / Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought." (Shelley). These poems by the two contemporary poets can be read as replies to each other, elaborating on the intensity of human suffering. The latter poem concludes that the superficiality of hiding pain under peals of laughter is the reason why the youth from the former poem perishes with time, and humankind withers being stuck in the circuit of pining for more, suffering, and sharing the groans of failure. The poets have constantly tried to paint an evocative picture of the social realities through their verses, illustrating the flaws, prejudices, and agony of humankind, and proving that the sole cause of these sufferings is the humans themselves. Contrary to this, the poets have drawn a picture of the realm of the songbirds. Most of the poets have received it as a distant domain, something that is incomprehensible by humans and is perfect. Wordsworth calls them 'A voice, a mystery' receding in a world shrouded with mysteries, hoarding all the good things that are deficient in his world. Coleridge in his poem - 'The Nightingale', gives a form to this alien abode of the Songbirds. "They answer and provoke each other's song, / With skirmish and capricious passagings, / And murmurs musical and swift

jug jug, / And one low piping sound more sweet than all / Stirring the air with such a harmony,” (Coleridge). Through Coleridge’s verse we somewhat visualize a clearer picture of the alternate universe or the residence of the songbirds. He describes it as a space virgin to human exploits, a place with nature thriving around, a place where each creature helps the other grow, instead of thwarting their growth, and a place where the anthropocentric ideologies, practices, and prejudices do not cloud the free flow of emotions tampering their thoughts. Thereby, the home of the songbirds is presented as a harmonious land attuned to the melodious cacophony of the lot, unlike the Human world that only has groans and laments to offer. The parallel juxtaposition of the two worlds by the poets is an attempt to point out the differences between the human-made, disharmonious world and the harmonious non-corrupted world of the songbirds. This distinctive pattern of simultaneously placing the two pictures in their poems is also an attempt to help the people see what is wrong and ugly and what is good and beautiful. The poets demonstrate how the humans have ended up getting trapped in a toxic circuit of being the stimulus behind the dwindling status of their clan, suffering from their fall and repeating the process with more immorality. Contrary to this they place the ways of the songbirds and the perfect world that they have created with their non-corrupted spirit and heartfelt singing. This world is devoid of all the curses of humankind. The poets also intend to show humankind the path for harmonious living devised by the songbirds and convince them about the superiority of the same, so that the perishing humankind learns what to acquire and what to dispel.

It is evident that the songbirds have influenced these composers from two different hemispheres, in diverse ways, however, there are few instances where their influence has been remarkably identical for both sides. The origin of the compositions from the two sides is absolutely different; belonging from different periods, different regions, and different minds. However, the uniformity in their ideas about bird songs and their influences in verses validate a lot of human realities that transcend time and boundaries. The songbirds have been commonly associated with hope in several compositions by both, the English romantics and Kazi Nazrul Islam. With their quality of illuminating the path for humankind, with their wisdom from the other world, the poets and the lyricist have often received them as the harbingers of new possibilities, eliminating the old problems and ushering in hope. “Bulbuli in the garden, don’t swing on the branches of the flower tree today.” This Nazrul Geeti is a sweet description of the advent of spring. Although the Bulbuli is responsible for waking the garden during the break of spring, the poet forbids them to wake up already, as he has realized that it is not time yet. He understood so because the Honeybees hadn’t yet come to him singing Gazal, marking the arrival of Spring. Then he proceeds to describe the beautiful garment that the garden wears during Springtime. The human desire of discovering what hopeful direction the Songbirds will reveal for them is aptly expressed by William Wordsworth in his poem ‘To the Cuckoo’, “To seek thee did I often rove / Through woods and on the green; / And thou wert still a hope, a love; / Still longed for, never seen” (Wordsworth). The humans longed for the enlightenment that the Cuckoo would confer upon them, that would let them experience a better world. They loved the chase for the unattainable wisdom and peace from the aerial creatures. The hope distributed by them did not just arrive with Spring, but also with Monsoon and rains. In a song about rains, Islam mentions how “The singing Papihaans” were participating in merrymaking along with the rest of the garden, ushering rain and calm in the charred land.

This catalyzes another feature observed on both sides - personifying the Songbirds and devoting a direct voice to them. Although most of the verses are human conceptions about the songbirds, Nazrul Islam, as well as John Keats, have given a direct voice to the songbirds. “I am a Bulbuli in a Rose garden singing the Gazal of colorful love.” - a lyrics by Kazi Nazrul Islam which is a song in the voice of a Bulbuli expressing its intention of promoting love through its Gazals and ushering hope and positivity in the monotonous world. A reflection of this similar theme can be found in a poem by Nazrul’s English counterpart, John Keats, ‘What the Thrush said’ - the title of the poem itself suggests that it is what the Thrush has to say. On

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reading the poem, we encounter the theme of hope yet again. The Thrush assures that the arriving spring will heal all wounds and give peace to the sufferers. These poets and the lyricist also practice the age-old practice of employing the songbirds as representatives of themselves. In his poem about Bards - "Bards of Passion and of Mirth", John Keats accurately delineates how the Songbirds are the reflections of the poets, singing songs around the same themes, "Where the nightingale doth sing / Not a senseless, tranced thing, / But divine melodious truth; / Philosophic numbers smooth; / Tales and golden histories / Of heaven and its mysteries." (Keats). The English Romantics considered the Nightingale's song to be infused with wisdom around their own mysterious world and the celestial world overhead. The poets believed that the Nightingales sang of unresolved mysteries about the universe and life; truths and philosophies inconceivable to human minds. The Sensitive minds of the poets could detect some of the offerings offered by the songbirds, and being the spokespersons of their society, they took it upon themselves to convey their enlightenment to the rest of the world. Thereby, they consecutively composed their verses of great philosophies and unique wisdom. Nazrul Islam, in one of his lyrics, expresses that, when human voices stop singing, one must get acquainted with the birds of the forest as they are a counterpart of the human singers. Thereby, it is evident how the Romantics and Nazrul Islam have settled with the connections between the unworldly songbirds and the poets in a few of their compositions. One common custom that can be traced in the compositions from both the climes is the composer's overwhelming opinion about the profoundness of the birdsongs. All the good attributes in the community of the Songbirds have holistically enriched them. Shelly, in his ode to the Skylark, projects how they 'Pourest thy full heart' into their art, singing the unparalleled music that is devoid of any contamination and is the crudest product of the artist. Later in his poem, he states his admiration for their art and prays that he can absorb such richness. "Teach me half the gladness / That thy brain must know, / Such harmonious madness / From my lips would flow / The world should listen then, as I am listening now." (Shelley). A very similar outlook on the profoundness of the Nightingale's song can be found in Coleridge's poem. "Have all burst forth in choral minstrelsy, / As if some sudden gale had swept at once / A hundred airy harps!" (Coleridge). The lines describing the greatness of the birdsongs prove how the poets themselves were enthralled by their art, and the purity of the same. Although Nazul Islam's songbirds have mostly voiced the sorrow in him, he has also written about how the profound birdsongs are the professors of good times in his life too, "Why is the Papihaan singing 'Kuhu Kuhu' continuously?" - this song elaborates the advent of spring, love, and positivity, and Nazrul says that the beautiful 'Kuhu Kuhu' of the *Papihaan* is of such high esteem that it will inevitably ensue all things good.

Writers of verses have always been inquisitive creatures. They were disappointed by the upsetting nature of humankind and unstirred by their bland experiences from the same. This in a way fed to their inquisition about the territory of the Songbirds, and they kept marveling over their state of existence. They constantly wondered what the birdsongs implied and the trajectory of the meanings that these composers have ascribed to the songbirds and their songs clearly show that they have placed these creatures from nature in a high echelon. The songbirds are projected as creatures capable of being muses to human art, leading the path to penitence and a beautiful world, aware of truths about the universe and generously shedding their wisdom. The Songbirds are the residents of a perfect alternate universe where everything is perfect sans the sufferings and ugliness of human civilization. The poets try to deliver that the beauty of their land is something they have achieved by themselves, by being beautiful themselves. Through their observation, they conjecture the sphere of the songbirds to be the ideal world that they long for. Their discussions about the Songbirds and their songs are also a device to criticize the human race for having complexities and for restricting their free flow of thoughts and emotions with stringent societal prejudices. It is to show their clan that these ill moralities of their race have resulted in it ending up being a shallow, suffering one. In spite of

the miscellaneous inferences by the poets from the two poles about the voices of these songbirds and their roles in verses, several questions linger on – it is a question of wonder, how extensive is the domain of the songbirds? Are, all the readings holistically sufficient compared to the vastness of possibilities from their realm? Were the composers able to comprehend their language justly? Contradictory to this, another query that arises is, is their land the utopian space that the poets have conjectured it to be, or is it the harbor of worse realities and sufferings?

Notes

1. A common nickname for Kazi Nazrul Islam.
2. A song that is inspired from a Raaga, taking a lot of its tune from the same.
3. Gazals are love lyrics belonging to the semi-classical genre of music.
4. A raag is a vital organ of south Asian classical music. These are compositions of music consisting of selective notes or *swaras*. Different ragas have different compositions.

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Bio-note

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