

**Promoting Interreligious Understanding in Modern Classrooms through the Poetry of
Kazi Nazrul Islam**

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Abstract

This paper explores how the poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam can be critically engaged in modern classrooms to promote interreligious understanding and communal harmony. Writing during the turbulent decades of colonial Bengal, Nazrul articulated a radical humanism that transcended sectarian identities and resisted both imperial domination and communal polarization. Through close textual analysis of poems such as *Bidrohi* and *Hindu Mussalman*, alongside his Hindu devotional songs (*Shyama Sangeet*) and Islamic compositions, this study examines Nazrul's syncretic imagination, symbolic hybridity, and ethical universalism.

The paper argues that Nazrul's poetic strategies enact a dialogic theology in which religious difference becomes a site of creative convergence rather than conflict. By situating his work within contemporary debates on multicultural education and critical pedagogy, the study demonstrates the continued relevance of Nazrul's verse as a literary resource for fostering empathy, pluralism, and intercultural dialogue in twenty-first-century classrooms.

Keywords: Humanism; Interreligious Dialogue; Communal Harmony; Literary Pedagogy; Syncretism

Introduction

The contemporary world is marked by increasing religious polarization, ideological extremism, and identity-based conflict. In plural societies, educational institutions are often the first sites where such tensions become visible. As classrooms grow more culturally and religiously diverse, educators confront the challenge of fostering interreligious understanding without erasing difference. Literature, in this context, becomes more than an aesthetic expression; it functions as a dialogic medium capable of nurturing ethical reflection and critical consciousness.

Among South Asian literary figures, Kazi Nazrul Islam occupies a singular position as a poet of rebellion, spiritual inclusivity, and humanistic universalism. Writing in early twentieth-century Bengal during British colonial rule, Nazrul confronted both imperial oppression and rising communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims. His poetry refuses sectarian boundaries and instead articulates a vision of humanity grounded in justice, equality, and shared spiritual heritage.

This paper argues that Nazrul's poetry provides a powerful literary framework for promoting interreligious understanding in modern classrooms. Through close textual analysis and theoretical engagement with concepts of syncretism, humanism, and dialogic pedagogy, this study demonstrates how Nazrul's poetic strategies enact pluralism at both thematic and structural levels. The aim is not merely to celebrate his inclusive ethos but to examine how his work can function as an analytical and pedagogical resource in contemporary education.

Historical Context: Colonial Bengal and Communal Politics

To understand Nazrul's interreligious vision, it is essential to situate his work within the socio-political climate of early twentieth-century Bengal. British colonial policies, particularly the Partition of Bengal in 1905, intensified communal divisions. Administrative strategies often exploited religious identities to consolidate imperial control, fostering suspicion between communities that had historically coexisted.

Nazrul emerged during this turbulent period. Unlike nationalist leaders who foregrounded a singular cultural identity, Nazrul articulated a composite vision of Bengali culture. Deeply influenced by Islamic theology, Sufi mysticism, Hindu mythology, and the Bhakti tradition, he embodied a lived syncretism. His refusal to be confined within rigid religious categories was itself a political act.

Nazrul's literary rebellion must therefore be understood as both anti-colonial and anti-communal. His poetry challenges imperial authority while simultaneously critiquing sectarianism within indigenous society. The convergence of these resistances forms the foundation of his humanistic poetics.

Theoretical Framework: Humanism, Syncretism, and Dialogic Pedagogy

Nazrul's poetry can be productively analyzed through three interrelated frameworks: humanism, syncretism, and dialogic pedagogy.

Humanism

Nazrul's humanism is not an abstract universalism but an ethical commitment to dignity and justice. His poems consistently foreground the oppressed—workers, peasants, and marginalized communities—regardless of religious affiliation. In this sense, his humanism aligns with ethical cosmopolitanism, which privileges shared humanity over divisive identity markers.

Syncretism

Syncretism in Nazrul's poetry operates not as superficial blending but as a dynamic intertextual dialogue. He juxtaposes Islamic and Hindu imagery within the same poetic space, thereby unsettling exclusivist narratives. This aesthetic strategy constructs what may be termed a "poetics of convergence," where religious symbols coexist without hierarchical ordering.

Dialogic Pedagogy

From a pedagogical perspective, Nazrul's poetry fosters dialogic engagement. Drawing upon Paulo Freire's concept of critical pedagogy, literature becomes a means of interrogating power structures and cultivating empathetic understanding. Nazrul's texts invite discussion, debate, and reinterpretation—essential components of interreligious education.

Mythic Convergence in *Bidrohi*

One of Nazrul's most celebrated poems, *Bidrohi* (The Rebel), exemplifies his syncretic imagination. The speaker proclaims a cosmic identity that encompasses multiple religious and mythological figures.

Hindu deities such as Shiva and Kali appear alongside Islamic imagery drawn from Qur'anic and Persian traditions. The poem's rhetorical excess—its sweeping metaphors and expansive self-identifications—creates a voice that transcends singular identity.

This strategy is significant for interreligious pedagogy. Rather than presenting religious symbols as mutually exclusive, Nazrul merges them within a unified lyrical consciousness. The speaker's declaration of being both destroyer and creator, ascetic and warrior, suggests that spiritual truth exceeds doctrinal boundaries.

Close reading reveals that Nazrul's syntax reinforces this convergence. Rapid shifts between mythological references destabilize fixed meaning, compelling readers to hold multiple traditions in simultaneous awareness. In classroom discussions, such textual complexity can encourage students to explore how literature resists binary thinking.

Communal Critique in *Hindu Mussalman*

While *Bidrohi* enacts a sweeping mythic synthesis through its cosmic and multi-religious self-fashioning, *Hindu Mussalman* adopts a more direct and dialogic mode to confront the lived reality of communal antagonism. In this poem, Kazi Nazrul Islam shifts from symbolic fusion to social critique. Rather than dissolving identities into a transcendent lyrical "I," he addresses the fraught relationship between Hindus and Muslims in concrete, historical terms.

The poem emerges from the socio-political tensions of colonial Bengal, where religious difference was increasingly mobilized for divisive ends. Against this backdrop, Nazrul interrogates the moral bankruptcy of sectarian hatred and exposes the hollowness of religious posturing devoid of ethical substance.

A central strategy in *Hindu Mussalman* is Nazrul's critique of religious hypocrisy. He challenges those who loudly proclaim their faith while perpetuating injustice, prejudice, and violence. By juxtaposing ritual observance with ethical failure, he questions the authenticity of religiosity that does not translate into compassion.

The tonal complexity of the poem further reinforces its critical force. Nazrul's voice oscillates between satire and exhortation. At moments, he employs irony to ridicule narrow-minded bigotry, exposing its absurdity. At other points, he adopts an impassioned, almost prophetic tone, urging unity grounded in shared humanity.

Devotional Hybridity: *Shyama Sangeet* and Islamic Songs

Nazrul's interreligious vision extends beyond thematic representation to devotional practice. He composed *Shyama Sangeet*—songs dedicated to Goddess Kali—alongside Islamic **Hamd** (praise of God) and **Naat** (praise of the Prophet). This dual authorship challenges rigid identity politics.

In his Kali songs, the goddess appears as both terrifying and compassionate, embodying cosmic energy. In his Islamic compositions, Allah is portrayed as merciful and just. Despite theological distinctions, the emotional register of devotion remains strikingly similar. Love, surrender, and yearning permeate both traditions.

From a literary perspective, Nazrul's use of Sanskrit and Arabic-Persian vocabulary within the same corpus exemplifies linguistic hybridity. This blending destabilizes assumptions about "pure" cultural identities.

Language and Symbolic Strategy

Nazrul's linguistic experimentation is central to his interreligious poetics. His diction frequently juxtaposes Persian-Arabic words with Sanskrit-derived vocabulary. This fusion reflects Bengal's composite linguistic heritage and enacts cultural pluralism at the level of language itself.

Symbolically, Nazrul often employs fire, storm, and music as unifying motifs. Fire becomes both destructive and purifying, while music transcends linguistic barriers. These recurring symbols operate as metaphors for transformative dialogue.

Classroom Application: Literary Analysis as Ethical Practice

In modern classrooms, Nazrul's poetry can be integrated through close reading, comparative analysis, and interdisciplinary dialogue. Literary analysis becomes an ethical practice when students are encouraged to examine how texts construct and deconstruct identity.

Students may analyze specific stanzas of *Bidrohi* to trace mythological references. Identifying both Islamic and Hindu symbols fosters awareness of cultural interdependence.

Contemporary Relevance

The twenty-first century has witnessed renewed debates on secularism, nationalism, and religious identity. In many societies, political rhetoric exploits religious difference for electoral gain. Against this backdrop, Nazrul's poetic insistence on unity appears strikingly prescient.

His work challenges the assumption that pluralism is a Western import. Instead, it demonstrates that South Asian literary traditions have long articulated inclusive visions of community.

Conclusion

The poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam offers a compelling literary resource for promoting interreligious understanding in modern classrooms. Through mythic convergence, devotional hybridity, linguistic fusion, and ethical humanism, Nazrul constructs a poetics of pluralism that remains urgently relevant in an age marked by renewed identity conflicts.

By inviting readers into a dialogic space where difference coexists with shared humanity, Nazrul models an approach to faith rooted in empathy and justice. When critically engaged, his poetry encourages students to question inherited prejudices, recognize historical complexities, and envision community as relational rather than oppositional—thereby transforming literary study into an ethical practice of coexistence.

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