

Research Article

Writing Resistance: Kazi Nazrul Islam's Prose and the Ethics of Anti-Colonial Politics

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Abstract

This article examines selected prose writings and journalistic essays by Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976) as a sustained form of anti-colonial political thought in colonial Bengal. Moving beyond the dominant image of Nazrul as a revolutionary poet, it repositions him as a vernacular political theorist whose prose articulates a counter-hegemonic ethics of resistance. Using discourse analysis and ideological criticism, the article shows how Nazrul's writing challenges colonial legality, exposes the epistemic foundations of imperial power, and constructs an alternative political subjectivity grounded in collective agency and moral responsibility. Through close readings of texts associated with *Jugobani*, *Dhumketu* and *Rajbandir Jabanbandi*, it argues that Nazrul turns journalism into political praxis and literature into ethical intervention. It further argues that his engagement with revolutionary violence yields a tragic ethics of resistance that refuses both pacifist idealism and romantic militancy. The article contributes to postcolonial scholarship by recovering Nazrul's prose as a site of indigenous political theory and decolonial critique.

Keywords

Kazi Nazrul Islam, resistance, colonialism, hegemony, ethics, praxis

1. Introduction

The history of Indian nationalism is inseparable from the literary and cultural resistance that accompanied it. From the late nineteenth century, literature in colonial Bengal became one of the principal ideological sites where political dissent, ethical critique and collective aspiration were articulated. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore helped shape a cultural consciousness that questioned imperial authority and reimagined Indian identity through historical memory, cultural regeneration and moral selfhood. Yet much

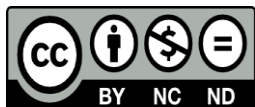
of this early nationalist writing remained within reformist and symbolic modes of protest, privileging spiritual renewal and ethical persuasion over direct confrontation with the material structures of colonial power.

Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976) marks a decisive shift in the tone and political orientation of Bengali nationalist writing. He rejected the conciliatory ethos of cultural nationalism and adopted an explicitly militant discourse that contested the legitimacy of British rule at its foundations. His corpus of poetry,

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songs, essays and journalism constitutes one of the most uncompromising critiques of colonial power in the subcontinent. Mondal (2023) reads this literature not as symbolic protest alone but as a mechanism of resistance that seeks to destabilise imperial authority through ideological confrontation and mass mobilisation.

Critical reception, however, has largely confined Nazrul to the figure of the “Rebel Poet” (*Bidrohi Kobi*), a label drawn from his celebrated poem “*Bidrohi*” (1922). The designation captures the affective force of his verse but has marginalised much of his intellectual legacy, above all his prose. The essays and editorials he published in *Nabajug*, *Dhumketu* and *Langal* are the most sustained and theoretically explicit statement of his political thought. They do not merely express nationalist sentiment; they work as sites of ideological production in which colonial authority is interrogated, ethical categories are redefined and political subjectivity is reconstructed. Existing scholarship on Nazrul’s decolonial significance has concentrated on his poetry (Rahaman, 2022; Sultana, 2020), which leaves his prose comparatively under-theorised.

This article argues that Nazrul should be read not primarily as a revolutionary poet but as a vernacular political theorist of counter-hegemony and ethical resistance. His prose, it proposes, constitutes an early indigenous theory of the counter-public sphere, in which literature operates as political pedagogy that aims to turn colonial subjects into ethical agents of resistance. The aim is not to fit Nazrul into existing postcolonial theory but to use his prose to rethink resistance, the public sphere and revolutionary ethics from a non-metropolitan intellectual tradition, in the spirit of Chakrabarty’s (2000) call to provincialise Europe. The argument also engages Guha’s (1997) account of colonial India as a condition of dominance without hegemony, since Nazrul’s prose repeatedly targets the moral and epistemic claims through which the colonial state sought consent.

Methodologically, the study combines discourse analysis and ideological criticism with postcolonial theory, grounded in close reading. Rather than treating the essays only as historical documents, it reads them as theoretical interventions that produce political meaning through language, rhetoric, symbolism and affect. This approach makes it possible to see how Nazrul constructs justice, violence, community and freedom within the discursive constraints of colonial modernity.

Nazrul’s prose is especially significant because it emerges from moments of direct political crisis. In *Rajbandir Jabanbandi* (The Deposition of a State Prisoner), the statement he made in court after his arrest in 1923, he declares that he has “no fear, no regrets” and calls himself “a son of the immortal” (Nazrul Islam, 1923/2014, pp. 201–206, as quoted in Rahaman, 2022, p. 122). The statement is more than rhetorical defiance. It inverts the moral order of the courtroom, stripping colonial law of legitimacy and putting in its place an ethical authority grounded in justice and historical accountability.

Nazrul does not simply resist colonial power; he redefines legality, crime and justice from the standpoint of the oppressed.

At a deeper level, his essays challenge the epistemological foundations of colonial discourse. Colonialism operates not only through political and economic domination but also through knowledge systems that construct the colonised as inferior, irrational and incapable of self-government. Nazrul’s prose dismantles these representations by exposing their ideological character and reasserting the dignity and agency of the colonised subject. Sultana (2020) similarly reads his writing as a decolonising pedagogy that unlearns colonial categories of thought.

The article also resists a purely celebratory reading. Nazrul’s advocacy of revolutionary violence, though ethically grounded, leaves tensions between moral responsibility and political necessity unresolved. His militant nationalism at times romanticises sacrifice and martyrdom, and his rhetoric of the mother-nation sometimes reproduces affective structures that demand unquestioning loyalty. These contradictions are not dismissed here. They are treated as constitutive tensions within anti-colonial ethics, revealing the limits and dilemmas of resistance under systemic domination.

The article proceeds in six steps. It first sets out its theoretical framework, then examines Nazrul’s journalism as political praxis, his rhetoric of revolution and ethics of violence, his construction of a counter-public sphere, the colonial state’s censorship and repression of his work, and finally his post-colonial legacy.

2. Theoretical Framework

Any engagement with Nazrul’s anti-colonial prose must be situated within a broader understanding of colonial discourse and the politics of resistance. Colonialism is not only a system of political domination and economic exploitation; it is also an epistemological structure that produces forms of knowledge, identity and hierarchy in order to legitimise imperial authority. Said’s (1978) concept of Orientalism explains how colonial power constructs the colonised as inferior, irrational and culturally deficient, justifying foreign rule in the name of civilisation and progress (pp. 2–3). Within this system the colonised are encouraged to internalise colonial representations of themselves, producing what postcolonial theorists describe as a crisis of cultural identity and historical agency.

Nazrul’s prose complicates this model. Said’s framework explains how colonial discourse operates; Nazrul’s writing shows how colonised subjects *interrupt* and *reconfigure* those discursive formations from within vernacular public culture. Rather than remaining trapped in a binary of domination and resistance, he constructs what may be called a counter-discursive ethics, in which language itself becomes a site of moral and political reorientation. His essays do not merely oppose

colonial representations; they undermine the epistemic authority of colonial knowledge by producing alternative categories of justice, legitimacy and historical truth (Mondal, 2023).

This is most evident in his rejection of colonial legality. In *Rajbandir Jabanbandi* he insists that what he has judged unjust he has called unjust, and what he has judged oppression he has called oppression (Nazrul Islam, 1923/2014, pp. 201–206, as quoted in Rahaman, 2022, p. 122). The gesture is an epistemic reversal: colonial law loses its normative authority and is replaced by an ethical conception of justice grounded in historical suffering. It invites us to rethink postcolonial theory's emphasis on discourse as representation. For Nazrul, resistance is not only counter-representation but ethical re-foundation, the creation of new normative frameworks through which political reality itself is judged.

Fanon's (1963) account of the colonised consciousness offers a further point of comparison. Fanon argues that colonial domination produces psychological alienation and internalised inferiority, so that decolonisation must be psychological as well as political. Nazrul anticipates this insight but extends it in a different direction. Rather than concentrating on psychic trauma, he foregrounds affect and moral courage as central categories of resistance, repeatedly invoking anger, indignation and ethical rage as forces necessary to overcome colonial passivity. In one editorial he is reported to have written that those who have forgotten how to be angry have forgotten how to be free [source and page needed: editorial title, Nazrul Rachanabali vol./page]. Political consciousness here is an affective and ethical disposition as much as rational awareness, so decolonisation requires emotional reorientation as well as knowledge (Sultana, 2020).

Nazrul's journalism also challenges dominant models of the public sphere. Habermas (1989) conceptualises the public sphere as a space of rational-critical debate among private people within bourgeois civil society (pp. 27–31). Nazrul wrote in a very different context, in which political participation was restricted, literacy uneven and public communication shaped by censorship and repression. His prose builds what may be described as a counter-public sphere of resistance, grounded less in rational deliberation than in ethical provocation, symbolic rhetoric and collective affect. His editorials resemble political sermons or manifestos more than neutral forums of debate, which suggests that in colonial conditions political communication must mobilise emotion, imagination and moral urgency and cannot rely on rational argument alone.

The implications for postcolonial studies are considerable. Nazrul's writings suggest that resistance in colonial societies cannot be adequately theorised through liberal models of public reason or discursive negotiation. It emerges instead as an ethical practice that works through affective mobilisation, symbolic inversion and moral confrontation, and writing itself becomes a performative act capable of reshaping collective consciousness (Mondal, 2023).

Nazrul also complicates postcolonial theory's tendency to romanticise subaltern agency (see Spivak, 1988). He consistently foregrounds mass participation, yet his rhetoric often assumes a unified moral community and a shared ethical will. This raises questions about the limits of ethical collectivism in fragmented and unequal societies, since his vision of unity risks erasing differences of class, gender and ideology in favour of a homogeneous revolutionary subject. The tension points to a dilemma within counter-hegemonic theory itself: how to build collective identity without producing new exclusions.

Nazrul's prose therefore does not simply exemplify postcolonial resistance; it exposes the unresolved contradictions of resistance as a theoretical category. Treating him as a producer of theoretical insight rather than an object of theory, the article finds in his writing a distinctive indigenous framework that integrates discourse, affect, ethics and historical accountability into a model of counter-hegemonic praxis.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Nazrul's Journalism as Political Praxis

Nazrul's journalism is one of the most important dimensions of his political engagement and a distinctive form of literary praxis within the anti-colonial movement. Unlike conventional journalism, which reports events or offers cautious commentary, his writing was conceived as direct political intervention. His essays and editorials were meant not merely to inform but to provoke, mobilise and ethically reorient public consciousness, turning the newspaper into a site of ideological struggle and mass political education. In this sense they exemplify engaged writing that refuses aesthetic neutrality. Mondal (2023) argues that his practice transformed vernacular print culture by converting the newspaper from a medium of information into a performative instrument of resistance.

Nazrul entered journalism in the early 1920s, amid the upheaval that followed the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the rise of the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movements. He joined the Bengali daily *Nabajug*, which soon won a reputation for its militant anti-British stance, and his editorials there, later collected in *Jugobani*, reject compromise and demand complete emancipation from imperial rule. In one editorial he is reported to have written that a government that feeds on the blood of the people cannot claim obedience from those it starves and imprisons [source and page needed]. The sentence illustrates his rhetorical strategy: colonial authority is delegitimised through moral inversion, so that obedience becomes unethical and resistance an ethical duty. Journalism here redefines the moral grammar through which political authority is judged (Sultana, 2020).

A striking feature of his journalism is its sustained exposure of colonial violence and racial hierarchy. In "Kala Aadmike

Guli Mara” (Shooting a Coloured Man), he addresses the routine killing of Indians by British officials and treats such violence as a consequence of racial ideology, asserting that to the colonisers a coloured man is not a man at all [source and page needed]. The passage presents racism as a structural logic embedded in colonial governance rather than as individual prejudice. Instead of appealing to liberal ideals of fairness, Nazrul exposes what might be called the ontological violence of colonialism, in which certain lives are rendered disposable by definition. Such passages anticipate later postcolonial critiques of racialised power.

His journalism also builds an ethics of collective action. The repeated use of collective pronouns (“we”, “our people”, “our motherland”) creates a sense of shared political destiny and converts individual suffering into national experience. Through affective language and symbolic imagery he invites readers to see themselves as participants in a historical struggle rather than passive subjects of imperial rule. Mondal (2023) notes that this performative dimension is central to the political effectiveness of his prose, which secures emotional identification and ethical commitment rather than rational agreement alone.

This construction of mass consciousness raises critical questions. The rhetoric presupposes a unified moral community, which can obscure internal differences of class, ideology and strategy, and its emphasis on collective sacrifice risks romanticising suffering and reducing political agency to moral fervour. While Nazrul seeks to empower the masses, his discourse sometimes assumes a homogeneous revolutionary subject and leaves little room for dissent or alternative political imaginaries. The tension reflects a wider dilemma in anti-colonial politics: how to mobilise collective identity without suppressing plurality and critical autonomy.

His commitment to communal harmony complicates the picture further. When British policy encouraged religious polarisation, Nazrul consistently emphasised Hindu–Muslim unity. In essays such as “The New Age” he calls on Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Buddhists to recognise their shared subjugation and resist sectarian division [source and page needed]. The same vision of unity appears in his poetry, for example in the lines of “Samyabadi” (“I Sing of Equality”) that unite Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians (see Rahaman, 2022, p. 126). Yet his idealised unity sometimes overlooks the structural realities of social inequality and cultural conflict. His rejection of communalism remains ethically powerful, but it at times functions as a moral abstraction rather than a sociologically grounded political strategy (Sultana, 2020).

The colonial state answered his journalistic radicalism with censorship and repression. His publications were confiscated, editorials banned and activities monitored under sedition laws. *Dhumketu*, the bi-weekly he edited from August 1922, was viewed as a dangerous platform that openly advocated

complete independence. His arrest in early 1923 followed the publication of his poem “Anandamoyeer Agomone” in the magazine’s September 1922 issue (Rahaman, 2022, p. 122). Mondal (2023) suggests that colonial repression itself testifies to the political effectiveness of his journalism, since the state perceived his writing as a genuine ideological threat rather than harmless cultural expression.

Censorship also reveals the limits of his journalistic model. His prose mobilised affect and ethical outrage, but its impact was uneven across classes and regions. Revolutionary newspapers circulated largely in urban centres and among literate readers, which raises questions about how far vernacular print culture could produce a genuinely mass political consciousness. His journalism thus embodies both the possibilities and the constraints of literary resistance: it transforms discourse and imagination while remaining dependent on literacy, access and political infrastructure.

Taken together, Nazrul’s journalism is a form of political praxis that redefines the relationship between literature and resistance. His essays do not merely reflect nationalist ideology; they produce political meaning by reshaping ethical categories, mobilising collective affect and challenging the epistemic authority of colonial power. The tensions within the practice, between unity and plurality, mobilisation and romanticisation, ethics and politics, reveal the unresolved contradictions of any project of mass resistance under systemic domination.

The Rhetoric of Revolution and the Ethics of Violence

Nazrul’s engagement with revolutionary violence is among the most complex and theoretically challenging dimensions of his thought. Unlike Gandhi, who framed resistance as moral persuasion and non-violent discipline, Nazrul articulated a militant vision of emancipation grounded in the necessity of radical action. His essays repeatedly suggest that colonial power, founded on systemic violence, cannot be dismantled by ethical appeals or symbolic protest alone. He rejects liberal-humanist frameworks that treat violence as an abstract moral problem and situates it within the concrete history of imperial domination (Mondal, 2023).

His conception of violence is nonetheless not a romantic glorification of militancy. It appears as a tragic ethical category produced by the structural conditions of colonialism. In his poem “Amar Kaifiyat” (My Defence, 1926), he is reported to have written that he did not choose the path of fire and that injustice forced it upon him [source and page needed: the only lines from this poem I could verify are quoted in Rahaman (2022, p. 126) and do not contain this passage]. Although this is verse rather than prose, it is used here because it states, in compressed form, the ethical logic that his essays develop at length. The line expresses the ethical logic of his militancy: violence is a historical imposition, a response to a political order that normalises coercion, humiliation and repression, rather than an expression of desire. Nazrul presents

revolutionary action as moral compulsion rather than ideological extremism, and so resists simple binaries between pacifism and brutality.

His rhetoric anticipates Fanon's (1963) argument that decolonisation is necessarily violent because colonialism is itself a violent structure (p. 35). He departs from Fanon in an important respect. Fanon often presents violence as psychologically regenerative, a cleansing force that frees the native from an inferiority complex (p. 94). Nazrul consistently stresses its ethical cost. His prose is haunted by images of suffering, sacrifice and loss, suggesting that revolutionary action entails moral injury as well as political necessity. In one editorial he is reported to have written that every chain that breaks draws blood and that freedom is never clean [source and page needed]. The formulation resists heroic narratives of revolution by naming the human price of political transformation and the irreversibility of the ethical damage violence causes (Sultana, 2020).

A crucial element of his ethics of violence is his critique of colonial legality. Colonial law presents itself as the guarantor of order and justice, but Nazrul exposes it as an ideological instrument of domination. In *Rajbandir Jabanbandi* he refuses to accept the court's verdict of treason, declaring instead that he has called injustice injustice and a lie a lie (Nazrul Islam, 1923/2014, pp. 201–206, as quoted in Rahaman, 2022, p. 122). The inversion is thorough: acts the colonial state defined as crimes (rebellion, dissent, refusal) become ethical imperatives, while acts it sanctioned (massacre, censorship, imprisonment) are exposed as moral crimes. Justice is no longer derived from legal institutions but from historical accountability and collective suffering.

This ethical inversion generates unresolved tensions. Nazrul's rhetoric at times turns violence into a moral absolute, valorising resistance without enough reflection on its long-term consequences. His frequent sacrificial imagery, the blood of martyrs, the purifying fire of revolution, the heroic rebel, sometimes borders on an aestheticisation of suffering. These metaphors serve powerful mobilising functions, but they also risk normalising death and replacing the individuality of victims with symbolic abstraction. The dilemma is one of revolutionary ethics generally: how to mobilise collective struggle without converting human suffering into ideological spectacle.

His symbolic imagination of the nation complicates matters further. The nation often appears as a militant mother who demands sacrifice from her children. Unlike nationalist imagery that portrays the nation as a passive victim, Nazrul's mother-nation is active, commanding and morally authoritative; she inspires devotion and also demands blood. The structure produces a powerful ethical imperative but raises concerns about political obligation. When the nation becomes a sacred entity, dissent becomes moral betrayal and disagreement risks being reinterpreted as ethical failure, blurring the boundary between ethical responsibility and ideological coercion (Mondal, 2023).

His critique of Gandhian non-violence sharpens these tensions. He acknowledged the mobilising power of the Non-Cooperation Movement but ultimately rejected non-violence as an adequate response to systemic injustice, regarding moral persuasion as a form of ethical self-deception that obscures the realities of power and prolongs the suffering of the oppressed. Yet his rejection of pacifism does not yield a coherent alternative ethical system. His writings oscillate between tragic realism and revolutionary idealism, an unresolved effort to reconcile ethical integrity with political necessity (Sultana, 2020).

Theoretically, Nazrul's engagement with violence exposes the limits of both liberal and radical moral frameworks. Liberal ethics abstracts violence from historical context and reduces it to universal principles, while revolutionary ethics often instrumentalises it for political ends. Nazrul occupies an unstable position between the two. His prose neither fully endorses nor fully rejects violence, treating it instead as an unavoidable ethical problem that philosophical consistency cannot resolve. The instability is a critical insight rather than a weakness: resistance under systemic domination is necessarily haunted by moral ambiguity.

Nazrul's rhetoric of revolution thus articulates a tragic ethics of resistance grounded in historical accountability rather than ideological certainty. It refuses both the innocence of pacifism and the purity of militancy. Nazrul emerges not as a prophet of violence but as a theorist of ethical risk, whose prose confronts readers with the uncomfortable fact that emancipation often demands choices that cannot be morally purified. This makes him a significant precursor to contemporary debates on the morality of resistance in postcolonial theory.

Prose, Public Sphere and Mass Consciousness

Nazrul's prose helped form an oppositional public sphere in colonial Bengal, where literature and journalism served as instruments of political mobilisation as well as cultural expression. Where formal political participation was severely restricted and institutional power lay with the imperial administration, the vernacular press became one of the main spaces in which political ideas could circulate and collective consciousness be shaped. His essays and editorials are best understood as interventions in this emerging public sphere, aimed at turning passive colonial subjects into politically conscious agents of collective resistance. They address not elite intellectual circles but ordinary readers (workers, peasants, students and urban labourers), widening nationalist discourse beyond privileged groups and recasting literature as popular political pedagogy (Mondal, 2023).

His construction of political consciousness relies on affective language and symbolic address. In a *Dhumketu* editorial he is reported to have summoned those who sleep in chains to wake, since the fire in their hearts is longer than the night [source and page needed]. The passage uses prophetic rhetoric

to collapse the distance between reader and political subject. The reader is positioned not as an observer of history but as its latent agent, morally summoned into action by emotive address. The public sphere here is a space of ethical interpellation rather than detached deliberation, and political identity is produced through affect as well as rational debate (Sultana, 2020).

This model complicates Habermas's (1989) account of a public sphere grounded in rational-critical discourse within bourgeois civil society. In Nazrul's context, with uneven literacy, pervasive censorship and structurally constrained participation, rational deliberation alone is insufficient as a mode of resistance. He constructs instead a counter-public sphere of affect and ethics, in which communication works through emotional mobilisation, symbolic inversion and moral provocation. Rahaman (2022), writing on his poetry, likewise reads his work as a pedagogy that cultivates ethical and cultural consciousness; the present article suggests that his prose extends that pedagogy into the newspaper.

Central to this counter-public sphere are collective identity markers such as "we", "our people" and "our motherland", which convert individual grievances into shared political experience. Through them Nazrul builds a moral community bound not by institutional membership but by collective suffering and ethical responsibility. His repeated invocation of "the people" has an ideological function, producing mass political subjectivity. Rather than appealing to abstract citizenship, he addresses readers as historically situated subjects whose dignity has been violated and whose agency must be reclaimed through collective action (Mondal, 2023).

The construction generates theoretical tensions. The rhetoric presupposes a unified moral community and may obscure differences of class, gender, ideology and political interest, flattening social complexity in favour of an imagined revolutionary subject who speaks with a single ethical voice. The strategy strengthens mobilisation but raises questions about exclusion, dissent and plurality, and suggests a political community grounded more in moral consensus than in deliberative conflict.

The material conditions of colonial print culture impose further limits. Despite his commitment to popular address, revolutionary newspapers such as *Dhumketu* and *Langal* circulated largely in urban centres and among literate readers. Much of rural and subaltern society was excluded from this discursive public sphere by constraints of literacy, access and economic marginality. His project of mass mobilisation therefore contains a paradox: it seeks to speak for the oppressed while depending on media structures that exclude many of them. The imagination of mass agency exceeded the material reach of communicative infrastructure, a dilemma common to anti-colonial cultural politics.

His critique of communalism reinforces the ethical character of this public sphere. When colonial policy encouraged

religious polarisation, Nazrul emphasised Hindu-Muslim unity and interfaith solidarity as foundations of resistance, arguing that communal identity worked as a colonial technology of division that diverted political energy from structural injustice towards internal conflict. By redefining the public sphere as an ethical collective rather than a competitive arena of identity politics, he tried to build a political community grounded in shared suffering and moral responsibility rather than religious affiliation (Sultana, 2020).

This ethical universalism also risks abstraction. His insistence on unity sometimes underplays the social and economic tensions of colonial society, including caste hierarchy, class antagonism and gender inequality. His rhetoric of solidarity remains morally powerful but at times functions as an idealised projection rather than a sociologically grounded strategy, a tension between the desire for inclusive community and the fragmented realities of colonial social structure.

Nazrul's prose thus redefines the public sphere as a space of ethical mobilisation rather than rational deliberation. His journalism constructs political subjectivity through affect, symbolism and moral address, enabling literature to work as a pedagogical instrument of resistance. The limits of the model, its reliance on moral consensus, its restricted material reach and its tendency towards abstraction, show the structural constraints of literary politics under colonialism. It embodies both the possibilities and the contradictions of cultural resistance.

Colonial Repression and the Politics of Censorship

The radicalism of Nazrul's writing brought him into direct confrontation with the colonial state, making repression and censorship central to his career and political identity. British authorities were acutely aware of the ideological threat his essays, poems and journalism posed, and he became one of the most heavily surveilled and censored writers of his generation. His experience shows how colonial power sought to regulate not only political behaviour but also cultural production, language and imagination, recognising literature as a potential instrument for destabilising imperial authority. As Mondal (2023) observes, the state's anxiety demonstrates that his writings were perceived as genuine ideological threats.

Censorship was a crucial mechanism for controlling oppositional ideas. Under sedition laws and press regulations such as the Press Act and the Defence of India Act, newspapers and literary texts critical of British rule were subjected to surveillance, confiscation and prohibition. Several of Nazrul's books, including *Jugobani*, *Pralay Shikha*, *Bhangar Gaan* and *Rudra Mangal*, were banned on the grounds that they incited rebellion and threatened public order. The bans reveal the state's recognition of his capacity to influence popular consciousness through literary means (Sultana, 2020).

Foucault's (1977) account of power as disciplinary rather than merely repressive helps explain this censorship. Power, in this framework, operates not only by prohibiting speech but

by producing norms, regulating discourse and shaping what can be said, thought and imagined (p. 194). Nazrul's persecution reflects a colonial strategy of discursive control aimed at political imagination itself. By criminalising certain forms of expression, the state tried to restrict the conceptual horizons of political thought and suppress alternative visions of justice and community. Censorship of this kind can be understood as epistemic violence in Spivak's (1988, pp. 280–281) sense: it works to erase radical imaginaries from the public sphere rather than merely silence individual voices.

His arrest in 1923 is the most dramatic instance of this disciplinary logic. After *Dhumketu* published his poem "Anandamoyeer Agomone", police raided the magazine's office, banned it and arrested him; he was charged with sedition and imprisoned (Rahaman, 2022, p. 122). His response in court, *Rajbandir Jabanbandi*, was not apology but ethical defiance. He declared that he stood in the dock as a man who had called injustice injustice, expressed "no fear, no regrets" (Nazrul Islam, 1923/2014, pp. 201–206, as quoted in Rahaman, 2022, p. 122). The statement turns the courtroom from a site of judgement into a site of ideological exposure. Rather than internalising the logic of colonial law, he reframes punishment as evidence of imperial insecurity and moral illegitimacy, so that imprisonment radicalises rather than disciplines the subject.

His prison experience thus reverses disciplinary power. The colonial prison was designed to produce obedient, self-regulating subjects; Nazrul used incarceration as a platform for ethical self-assertion. His hunger strike, which Rahaman (2022, p. 122) reports lasted forty days, in protest against the ill-treatment of political prisoners, subverted the logic of discipline further by turning bodily suffering into political spectacle. The prison did not erase his agency: the body became a site of resistance, pain became testimony and endurance became ethical protest (Mondal, 2023).

This heroic narrative must also be approached critically. Transforming suffering into symbolic resistance risks aestheticising repression and romanticising martyrdom. His prison rhetoric sometimes elevates pain into a moral virtue, potentially obscuring the everyday brutality experienced by countless anonymous political prisoners whose suffering never entered public memory. The problem is general to resistance discourse: converting structural violence into symbolic capital can reproduce hierarchies of visibility and value within political suffering.

Censorship also, paradoxically, amplified the circulation and symbolic power of his writings. Although his books were banned and newspapers confiscated, many texts continued to circulate clandestinely. Readers shared prohibited material, memorised revolutionary songs and recited banned poems at political gatherings. Censorship did not eliminate his influence but intensified it, turning his writings into forbidden objects associated with danger, courage and defiance. Colonial repression thereby produced, inadvertently, a radical reading

public for whom literary consumption itself became an act of political risk (Sultana, 2020).

This symbolic power should not be overstated. The reach of banned literature remained limited by literacy, geography and economic access. Nazrul became a powerful icon among urban political communities, but much of the rural and subaltern population remained excluded from direct engagement with his texts. Censorship operated unevenly, producing zones of intense ideological conflict alongside areas of continued political invisibility.

Nazrul's confrontation with censorship ultimately exposes the fragile foundations of imperial authority. The state possessed extensive legal and institutional means of controlling dissent, yet it could not fully regulate ideological production or ethical imagination. His continued influence despite repression shows the limits of disciplinary power and the persistence of cultural resistance under authoritarian control. The contradictions within his response, between ethical defiance and romantic martyrdom, between symbolic visibility and structural exclusion, underline the ambivalence of literary resistance in colonial contexts.

Nazrul and Postcolonial Legacy

Nazrul's legacy extends beyond the conditions of colonial Bengal and offers a framework for rethinking resistance, political subjectivity and ethical responsibility in postcolonial contexts. Although his writings responded to British domination in early twentieth-century India, their conceptual structures anticipate central concerns of later postcolonial and decolonial theory. He emerges not merely as a nationalist writer but as an indigenous political theorist who interrogates power, freedom, justice and historical agency from within a vernacular intellectual tradition.

One significant aspect of his relevance is his structural understanding of imperial power. Rather than treating colonialism as a temporary arrangement or a deviation from European ideals, he conceptualised it as a total system of domination sustained by violence, racial hierarchy, economic extraction and ideological control. His essays show colonial authority operating through everyday practices of humiliation, surveillance and cultural regulation as well as through laws and institutions. In one essay he is reported to have written that the empire rules not only with guns but by teaching the colonised to fear themselves [source and page needed]. The formulation anticipates later critiques of internalised colonialism and shows his awareness of power as psychological and epistemic as well as political (Mondal, 2023).

His insistence on mass agency further distinguishes his legacy. Unlike elite nationalist traditions that privileged institutional reform and charismatic leadership, he foregrounded collective political subjectivity as the foundation of emancipation. Workers, peasants and marginalised communities occupy a central position in his prose as ethical agents of historical

transformation rather than symbolic figures. The emphasis anticipates the project of Subaltern Studies but differs in one respect. Whereas subaltern historiography often recovers lost voices retrospectively, Nazrul sought to produce subaltern political consciousness in real time through journalistic pedagogy and affective mobilisation.

From a contemporary perspective he also challenges liberal models of postcolonial politics that equate freedom with legal sovereignty or institutional independence. His writings expose the limits of political emancipation unaccompanied by social, economic and ethical transformation, warning that independence without justice merely replaces foreign rulers with indigenous elites and leaves structures of inequality intact. The critique resonates with present-day realities in which formally independent states reproduce colonial patterns of governance, exploitation and exclusion. Sultana (2020) argues that his political imagination resists reducing freedom to juridical status and understands emancipation as an ongoing ethical struggle against all forms of domination.

His significance is equally evident in his vision of a pluralistic community. His insistence that Hindus and Muslims recognise their shared subjugation reflects a deep commitment to inclusive political identity, a commitment also visible in his poetry (Rahaman, 2022, pp. 126–127). This vision contains unresolved tensions: it sometimes idealises community and underestimates the depth of divisions of caste, class and gender, and his universalist ethics occasionally operates as a normative abstraction that overlooks material inequality (Mondal, 2023).

His revolutionary ethics complicates the legacy further. His refusal to endorse non-violence as a universal principle reflects a structural understanding of power, yet his rhetoric at times aestheticises sacrifice and martyrdom. In one essay he is reported to have written that history remembers only those who burn [source and page needed]. The statement captures the tension in his philosophy: it affirms the ethical necessity of resistance while risking the transformation of suffering into symbolic capital and of political struggle into heroic spectacle. He is a thinker deeply aware of the moral costs of political action who cannot fully resolve them.

Literarily, his legacy lies in a transformation of prose form. His essays blur the boundaries between journalism, political theory, poetry and moral philosophy, producing a hybrid discourse that anticipates later postcolonial literary practice. This stylistic hybridity disrupts colonial norms of literary expression and challenges the separation of aesthetic production from political engagement. It contributes to a tradition of engaged writing in which literature is ethical intervention rather than detached representation, and the refusal of disciplinary boundaries can itself be read as a decolonial strategy.

Despite this significance, Nazrul remains marginal within global postcolonial theory, which continues to privilege Anglophone metropolitan thinkers and Western theoretical

genealogies. The marginalisation reflects an epistemic bias that overlooks vernacular intellectual traditions and non-European forms of political thought. Re-centring Nazrul contributes not only to the reinterpretation of Indian literary history but to the decolonisation of theory itself, and forces the question of where theory is produced, in what language and under what historical conditions.

Nazrul's legacy lies finally not in a completed political philosophy but in exposing the unresolved contradictions of resistance. His writings present freedom not as a stable condition but as a fragile ethical project haunted by violence, inequality and historical uncertainty. He offers no easy answers; he confronts the reader with the ethical risks of political action and the moral ambiguities of collective struggle. His prose remains a critical resource for contemporary postcolonial thought, a reminder that emancipation is a continuously contested ethical practice rather than an inherited achievement.

4. Conclusion

This article has re-examined selected essays and journalistic writings by Kazi Nazrul Islam as a sustained and theoretically complex form of anti-colonial discourse within the intellectual history of colonial Bengal. Moving beyond his reception as a revolutionary poet, it has argued that his prose constitutes a major yet under-theorised body of political thought, articulating a distinctive ethics of resistance grounded in counter-hegemonic discourse, mass political subjectivity and moral responsibility. His essays do not merely express nationalist sentiment; they intervene in the ideological structures of colonial power by making literature a site of political praxis and ethical confrontation.

Across its sections, the article has shown that Nazrul's prose functions as indigenous political theory that challenges both the material and epistemological foundations of British rule. His writings dismantle colonial myths of benevolent governance, civilisational superiority and legal legitimacy by exposing the violence, racial hierarchy and economic exploitation embedded in imperial structures. In this respect he anticipates and complicates key insights of postcolonial theory, particularly the understanding of colonialism as a total system operating through discourse, culture and subjectivity as well as political and economic domination. Rather than fitting existing frameworks, he compels their revision by placing ethics, affect and historical accountability at the centre of resistance.

One of the most significant contributions of his prose is its reconfiguration of political subjectivity. Unlike elite nationalist discourse oriented towards institutional reform, legal negotiation or charismatic leadership, Nazrul foregrounded mass agency as the basis of political transformation. Workers, peasants and marginalised communities appear in his writing as ethical agents of historical change. This aligns him with later

traditions of subaltern thought while distinguishing his attempt to produce political subjectivity through literary pedagogy and affective mobilisation rather than recover it retrospectively.

The article has also highlighted the ethical complexity of his engagement with revolutionary violence. His refusal to accept non-violence as a universal solution reflects a structural understanding of colonial power, yet his rhetoric resists romantic glorification of militancy. He articulates a tragic ethics of resistance in which political action is morally necessary but ethically costly, and violence appears as historical compulsion rather than ideological virtue. He emerges as a theorist of ethical risk rather than a prophet of revolution.

His journalism shows how literature can serve as a pedagogical instrument of mass consciousness and political imagination. Through emotive rhetoric, symbolic address and accessible language, it reshaped the colonial public sphere by mobilising affect, dismantling internalised inferiority and generating collective political identity. The article has also examined the limits of this model: its tendency to assume moral consensus, its dependence on print culture and its occasional abstraction of social difference. These tensions show that his public sphere embodies both the possibilities and the contradictions of cultural resistance under colonialism.

From a broader postcolonial perspective, Nazrul's prose remains relevant to contemporary debates on nationalism, social justice and resistance. His insistence on communal harmony and ethical collectivism offers a counter-narrative to exclusionary and sectarian nationalisms in South Asia, and his vision of freedom challenges liberal models that reduce emancipation to legal sovereignty. For Nazrul, freedom is an ongoing ethical struggle against all forms of domination: colonial, social, economic and psychological.

By repositioning Nazrul as a political theorist of resistance rather than only a rebel poet, this study contributes to the decolonisation of postcolonial theory itself and treats vernacular intellectual traditions as legitimate sites of conceptual production. His voice endures not only as a memory of colonial struggle but as a continuing ethical challenge to all forms of power that seek to govern through silence, fear and ideological control.

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