

The Celebration of the Self: A Journey towards Eternity

Rinku Saha

Lecturer, Department of English
European University of Bangladesh
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract:

The Self or Ego holds a super power that can fight against all kinds of misdeed to establish peace and beauty. It is an issue that can be multiplied in different aspects and painted with different colors. Because of its glorification, the Self has become one of the major concerns in literature. Rabindranath Tagore presents the Self as the most precious creation of God in the poem called 'Ami' and explains a correlative aspect of God and human beings through the presentation of poetic truth and philosophical truth. Kazi Nazrul Islam, however, portrays the Self with heroic zeal in his poem 'Bidrohi'. In his view, the Self is so powerful that it can fight demonic power to establish equality, fraternity and tranquility. Mohammad Nurul Huda, on the other hand, presents the Self in a postmodern context where the theme of recreation and regeneration informs a metamorphic assimilation of the physical "I" with the spiritual "I" in his poem 'I, The I'. This paper is going to present the celebration of the Self in the three poems namely 'Ami', 'Bidrohi' and 'I, The I' respectively by Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Mohammad Nurul Huda. The concentration will be on the 'I' as a factor of recreation and regeneration with its direct connection with omnipresent God and its journey towards eternal world to be mingled with the supreme Self.

Key Words: Supreme Self; Eternity; Sufism; Metamodernism

Introduction:

In this postmodern world, most people are busy upholding the individual ideals in a selfish way. This trend of individualism inspires competition and that is the root of all kinds of problems in this planet. The way out of all these problems is to realize the power of the Self and glorify it in every possible way. It means to discover the power of the Self, trust it and then orient it towards good.

In literature, the place of the Self is very significant. Especially in American literature, the celebration of the Self draws the attention of the lovers of the literatures. In this respect, ~~the~~

‘Song of Myself’ by Walt Whitman can be mentioned where the worship of the Self has reached an epical height. Truly speaking, the worship of the Self is initiated during the Romantic period. Through the subjective expression, the Romantic writers glorify the Self and thus speak about the common people, for example, in *The Preface to Lyrical Ballad*.

In modern poetry, the celebration of the Self still remains in the solid ground in the literary world of both the East and the West. In South Asia, especially in India and Bangladesh, poets advocate the concept of the Self to show its super power to stand against all kinds of oppression. Rabindranath Tagore, for instance, expresses the power of the Self in his poem ‘Ami’. He has brought the power of the Self within the borderline of man. Through self revelation he defines and characterizes all the creation of the world. The national poet of Bangladesh, Kazi Nazrul Islam declares the Self as the rebellious savior and a champion of love. His poem ‘Bidrohi’ (The Rebel) presents polyphonic voice of the Self. Mohammad Nurul Huda, one of the contemporary poets of Bangladesh, tries to identify the origin of the Self. Like T. S. Eliot, Mohammad Huda talks about regeneration and recreation. He the concept of Sufism into his poem to merges the earthen world with the spiritual world. All these poets glorify the Self in their own ways, but the common issue remains the attachment with God in different respects. This tendency of attachment has attempted to bring peace and harmony in the world.

The Mystic Presentation of Self:

From the beginning of civilization to the present machine-based world, people have discussed the Self and wondered about its power. Its connection with the Omnipresent has been meditated upon time to time. The Self, in fact, is called in different names in different linguistic areas. In Bangla, it means ‘Ami’ which comes from the Sanskrit word ‘Aham’. In German, it is ‘Ich’ while in English ‘I’. The other name of the Self is Ego. Though rituals are distinctive in different religions, the core concept of union of an individual with God is almost identical in every divine cult, especially in Buddhism and Hinduism. Here the Self has been represented with spiritual dimension to it. In Buddhism, the concept of unification is presented implicitly. However, the term ‘Nirvana’ means complete dissolution and is supposed to be the ultimate goal of all human beings. This is, indeed, a form of unification. In Upanishad, it is said that the Self or Soul is not a different or distinctive part, rather it is a part of the Super Soul. Through repeated lives and deaths, it purifies itself and finally gets mingled with God. These mystic ideas are not new in Bengali literature. Mohammad Nurul Huda, a major Bangladeshi poet and critic, points out the presence of Sufism in Bengali literature and says,

“... its acculturation was not overt in the mainstream literature here. It was frequently

traceable in the folk writings, more particularly in the songs by our folk maestros. The immediate forerunner of Nazrul is undoubtedly Fakir Lalon Shah. He sang of self ‘I’ who is eager to diffuse in the existence of the Omnipotent. The same has happened to Nazrul in a deviated from in his famous text ‘Bidrohi’ or ‘The Rebel’. It may be also mentioned that the philosophy of the self was not a new phenomenon to a particular community of the world; rather it has a symmetrical tradition of interpretation in all enriched ancient civilizations. The essence and connotation of ‘I’ was duly recognized in the west,

especially in Greek philosophy, much before the birth of Christ. ‘Know thyself’- this realization is present in both Buddhist and Pagan philosophy. Numerous ancient symbols, forms or mythological themes from different parts of the world, especially Greek, Chinese, Macedonian, Egyptian and Indian regions bear testimony to it. Similarly, the Ruhaniat (emanating from soul) spirit in Islam is an essential articulation of this universal interpretation of self, available in diverse expressive forms by different creative maestros.”(Huda, 2014)

In fact, the concept of self has been celebrated time to time and its connection with God is obvious. Therefore, from a religious perspective the presentation of self has achieved a new dimension. The poets under discussion, Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Mohammad Nurul Huda have come forward to discuss it, either as an expression of man’s self esteem or an insurgency against oppression.

‘Ami’ (I or The Self): Rabindranath Tagore

It is a great enigma for human beings whether the matters depend on mind or it is the other way around. To Tagore, it is all about the consciousness of mind and this thought has been presented through his poem ‘Ami’. The poem, ‘Ami’ was written by Rabindranath Tagore (1861- 1941) on 29 May, 1936 and was included in his poetical work *Shyamoli*.

Cognition is the most important thing through which we can perceive everything. It is through the means of awareness about the pace of civilization that man can define or explain the world. Ego is responsible for the perseverance of creation. But for ego all these creations would have been meaningless. He says that it is neither the colour of gems nor the beauty of flowers but the conviction that illuminates our mind to talk about it. He affirms, “it exists because I say there it is. I say, the pearl is red so it is red. So, it is nothing but the encoloration of man’s mind that gives an extra dimension to the perception that illuminates the sky.” Tagore tries to come out from all the fundamentalist dogma to glorify the Self.

Perceiving the beauty and truth, human beings prove themselves as the supreme creation of Creator. The poet is proud on behalf of the whole mankind. On his pride, Creator uses His magic wand. All the creative talents of God become successful and meaningful because of the existence of human beings and their exclusive power of perseverance. Tagore says,

“With my senses’ hues

Emerald as green I muse

And the coral as red;

As my sight I spread

The sky is luminous

East to West with light glorious;

To rose I said, “Bonny is thee”

And so did she be!” (Trans. by Gupta, 2013)

This view of Tagore has resemblance with the poem “God” by Kazi Nazrul Islam, where the very first line is “Seeing myself, I see the unseen Creator”. Here exists the tendency of bridging the distance between the individual and the supreme soul. According to Tagore, the Omnipotent has an effort to know Himself through the border line of man’s Ego. It is called ‘Ami’ or ‘I’. Within the depth of the light and shadow it gets unified and as a result negation got the affirmation.

Tagore’s this view of the Self is very similar to a concept of the famous philosopher Rene Decartes, who believed that the only thing that remains true is a mind or consciousness doing the doubting and believing of its perception as we see in his famous formulation ‘I think therefore I am’. He explains: “I am, I exist, that is certain ... I know that I exist, and I inquire what I am, I whom I know to exist ... [W]hat then am I? A thing which thinks. What is a thing which thinks? It is a thing which doubts, understands, conceives, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels ... For it is so evident of itself that it is I who doubts, who understands, and who desires, that there is no reason here to add anything to explain it. And I have certainly the power of imagining likewise; for although it may happen (as I formerly supposed) that none of the things which I imagine are true, nevertheless this power of imagining does not cease to be really in use, and it forms part of my thought.” (Decartes, 1941) Of course, the thematic representations are different, but from the perspectives of human perception, these two can be comparable.

In his conversation with Einstein, Rabindranath expresses his conviction in humanism where lies the universal truth, the existence of Creator. He says, “The world is a human world — the scientific view of it is also that of the scientific man. Therefore, the word I, apart from us does not exist; it is a relative world, depending for its reality upon our consciousness. There is some standard of reason and enjoyment which gives it truth, the standard of the eternal man whose experiences are made possible through our experience.” In the question of realization of human he said, entity, “.....one eternal entity. We have to realize it through our emotions and activities.

We realize the supreme man, who has no individual limitations, through our limitations.” (Conversation, 1930) The poem ‘Ami’ was written 6 years after this conversation. A perfect reflection of this conversation is found on the poem. He places humanism above all kinds of

philosophy.

Nihilistic people or believers of ontology are usually pessimists. If their suspicion of the destruction of the world becomes true, there will be no man or woman, no feelings, no music, no emotion. There will be nothingness all over the world. Also, there will be no utterance of appreciation of love and beauty. Creator will be all alone. In the poem 'Ami', the poet assures us that, in such a moment Creator will sit for 'Sadhana' (meditation) to create again the new existence of man in the world. He will request the human being to utter "you are beautiful, I love you". As Tagore says:

Will the Creator sit in meditation

Again over ages for incantation –

“Speak up, speak up, say thou art bonny

I love thee honey!” (Trans. By Gupta, 2013)

The Creator cannot stand alone apart from his creation. A strong bonding exists between them and here lies the message of union of man with God. The theme of regeneration and recreation is skillfully presented here. One interesting aspect of this poem is that God Himself feels the necessity to be with man. According to Tagore, his religion is in the reconciliation of the super personal man, the universal spirit, in his own individual being. Here lies the perpetuity.

Rabindranath Tagore's 'Ami' or 'I' is the signifier Man to signify anything whatever in the world. 'Ami' or 'I' as expressed in this poem is the medium, measure and standard of all things, which would seek existence. This 'Ami' is the spokesman of man who stands at the epicenter of the creations in the whole universe. It is revelatory which can enable him to achieve his liberation. In other words, Tagore uses 'Ami' as his own being without which every object around him becomes meaningless. In a glorious attempt to find himself in the position of a modernist, or rather a metamodernist exponent of the meaning of life and belief in divinity or whatever biblical in the matter of interpretation of the sensual world with all its multicolored dimensions and ideas of damnation or redemption, Tagore, in this poem asserts vigorously that Man is the ultimate signifier, and every other object around him is signified by Man only. In the last phase of his life, Tagore composes the poem "Ami" and considers it to be a representative of his poetry and literature. Professor Nihar Ranjan Ray and Dr. Shaswata Bhattacharya have provided eloquent interpretation of the poem emphasizing that it stands at the core of the literary creations of Rabindranath Tagore. It is possible that the poem is a different version of what existentialism stands for in the opinion of Sartre, the philosopher. Yet, Tagore is unique in his neo-Romantic rhapsody of the glorification of 'Man's identity when there looms large a threat against human peace and soul in the postmodern anarchy called "Things Fall Apart."

Bidrohi (The Rebel): Kazi Nazrul Islam

‘Bidrohi’ by Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) is one of the most towering poems in Bangla literature and it is timeless, spontaneous, inspiring and fully emotion- charged. The poem was written in 1921 to raise a voice against the oppression and tyranny of British colonial rules in India so that the then freedom-cherishing people of this area could be inspired to initiate non-violent mass movement for independence. It is a poem where man’s individual capacity along with his creative power is worshiped. It suggests a diverse interpretation of the Self in the word picture of “Ami” or “I”. With a singular ‘I’, he has discovered immense meaning of this individual Self and thus the individual ‘I’ becomes a universal composite. Nazrul’s representation of I becomes the soul talk of all the people of Indian subcontinent who were under the heavy jackboots of British Empire. It is really a great journey of subjectivity towards objectivity for empowering the selves that can easily stand against the oppressor’s dominance. But through this meaningful journey it develops gradually in thought and ends with a desire of the unification with supreme Self.

In the poem ‘Bidrohi’, there are 141 uneven lines and Nazrul presents I in almost all the lines, 127 times in total. The meaning of the “I” has multiple layers but obviously goes towards supreme Beauty through its journey towards supreme Self. For instance, one of the famous literary critics Professor Momtazuddin Ahmed tries to discover a link between his personal life and his presentation of “I”. He says,

“In fact, there is hardly any difference between the diverse ‘Ami’ (I) in Nazrul’s ‘Bidrohi’ and the search for his ‘Supreme Beauty’ in the following nineteen years (till 1941, when Nazrul spoke of his Supreme Beauty in one of his latest speeches). The tide of an animation drove him towards the ocean of realization.

His personal life, his time and a benign world of Supreme Beauty that he dreamt all his life were not affected at all by his continuous search for this Beauty. His ‘self’ is that self which is at once furious and beautiful. His dedicated endeavour, rather his worship, was directed towards discovering God’s ferocity and beauty.” (Huda, 2001)

He diversifies his identity at first at the height of the Himalayan peak or the seat of the creators. But in conclusion he surrenders to the universal Self when he feels that there is a trace of oppression free world. In this poem, the Self has been presented in different identities such as that of a hermit and savior. He prefers presenting his Self as a Napoleon-like warrior, who is arms suited, to the prince who is down to the earth like Goutam Buddha, who gave up all his royal affluence to bring the message of world peace. Last few lines of the poem present mystic significance of the poem:

I'm made of clay, I'm embodiment of the soul

I'm imperishable, inexhaustible, immortal

I intimidate the humans, demons and god, the supreme humanity,

Traversing the heaven and earth. (Trans. by Kamal, 1999)

Through this expression we find the Self as the super power that draws all the sinful Self to be united with the divine Self which is the symbol of purity, tranquility and peace. Nazrul Islam upholds his Self to declare a war against tyranny and dominance to be with the universal Self.

From the mystic aspects, though there is a similarity between Nazrul's "I", Lalou's "I" and Buddha's "I", Nazrul uses more than one hundred word images in his poem 'Bidrohi', which expresses Islamic myth and metaphor, Indian myth and symbol, opposition, contradiction and reconciliation time to time. These numerous word images take the poem to a new height that entitles it to be a timeless poem. All these intensify the Self's interest to be torn into different pieces and at last be with the supreme Self. He is like a sufi who gives up self interest to be united with God and who can be in such a state to pronounce his madness directly. He says,

'I'm mad, I'm mad!

I have realized myself,

All the barriers have crumbled away'. (Trans. by Kamal, 1999)

Through these repetitions, on the one hand Nazrul expresses his power to stand against the colonial rules to establish peace in this sub continent. On the other hand, he paves his way towards eternal peace by mingling with God through Sufi ideology.

I, The I: Mohammad Nurul Huda

Mohammad Nurul Huda, a contemporary poet of Bangladesh and a participant of peace procession through poetry all over the world, is the latest of the poets who have come under the purview of our discussion on the Self. 'I, The I' is one of his famous poems. This poem is very much postmodern in terms of genre as it contains pastiche, fragmentation, polyphonic utterance, juxtaposition, open-endedness, etc. Poet Huda speaks of Self from different dimensions in the poem. He rejects the ideas of Self that comes from different traditional sources. His "I" does not come from any singular number like he, she or you that presents personal identity, rather it stays above all. The "I" does not come from murderer, savior or the philosopher. Unlike other writers like Nazrul, Whitman, Shakespeare or Baidik Rishi (The Vedic Saint), he utters:

"The I whom I know

Was born once in many times, never to die

The I whom I know always has to lie

On some soil or a soul,

And it does fly and fly, and always fly" (Huda, 2015)

Poet Huda represents the Self that exists all over the world, even in all the silly and unnoticeable points. To celebrate the Self, he presents "I" as a means of regeneration and recreation. Constantly, he shifts from subjective "I" to objective "I". To talk about regeneration, the union of male and female is expressed throughout the poem. "I" is present everywhere in every form. It is like Tiresius who experienced the life of both male and female and who could say past, present and future.

We know that "zikr" has a direct association with our religious literature, especially Sufi literature. In this poem we find a flavor of Sufism through "zikr" in the last part of first section.

"In its verbal signification it implies: to remember, to praise by frequently mentioning; to rehearse; to celebrate or commemorate; to make much of; to cherish the memory of as a precious possession. In Sufi devotions zikr represents both a solemn ritual and a spiritual state of mind or heart, in which the devotee seeks to realize the presence of God." Poet Huda uses 'I' for 136 times without any punctuation mark inside and it appears in a manner of "zikr". He expresses his utmost desire to be one with the omnipotent. So, he pronounces 'I' repeatedly like a sufi who pronounces 'Allah' and wants to go to one point where there exists nothing in between. He tries to receive an aesthetic pleasure at the end. He follows the instruction of Surah Al Baquara to go towards God. *"Then do ye remember Me; I will remember you. Be grateful to Me and reject not*

faith. 156” (Trans. by Ali).

The poem ends with the repetition of the word “eat”, which hints at a great fact about human life and the earth, which is we live to eat which cannot be ignored in any ways. Only eating can bring happiness in mind and body. He says,

“eat eat eat eat eat eat eat eat eat

eat the surfeit eat the I

I, the I” (Huda, 2015)

In a literal sense, people work because they want to live and it is impossible to live without eating. In another sense, the world always draws everything within it. Every natural thing, both animate and inanimate, is going towards ending. There is no escape from it. So, the word “eat” has a great significance in the poem. By destroying everything, it creates a new one and ultimately dies gradually. Here exists the issue of regeneration that we find in the theme of *Upanishad*, where it is said that through regeneration man starts his journey towards the perpetual world.

Conclusion:

Along the advancement of modernism from what was medieval attitude to life, poet and philosophers have come a long way closer to the Self or the human soul and got more attached to God, identified with the Self. Mohammad Nurul Huda, the latest of the poets in the series to uphold the idea of peace, has spoken of Metamodernism, which is going back to the Self or the Creator for eternal peace as well as to Eternity. Though Kazi nazrul Islam is very indicative of upholding the invincible Self in a war-mongering way and with an ability to destroy the demonic forces, his view is to achieve the divine target, ‘the ocean of truth.’ Rabindranath Tagore is sublime in his expression and opposed to Nazrul’s heroic assertion of the Self. He has sung the song of going back as far as to the down-graded, the downtrodden and the fallen ones (“Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest, and lowliest, and lost”). The poets have gone so long a way to man that they can find the Self at rest and in peace. That is what is called the celebration of the Self and the advancement of civilization of mankind. These three great poets of the Indian sub-continent, Modernist or Metamodernist in their approach to literature, have paved the way of man’s eternal journey to the emancipation of soul aiming at total peace. They have made their steps to divinity and brought humanity to a new peak.

References:

1. Ali, Y. Translation 2:152. *Sura Al-Baqara*. "Zikr the Rememberence of Allah". <http://muslimcanada.org/sufi/zikr.htm>. Accessed 30July,2017
2. Descartes, R. *Meditations On First Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1641.
3. Gupta R. D. "The Eclipsed Sun". *Cyberwit.net*. 2002.
4. Huda M. N. "The Mystic in the Reble". *Metamodern and Other Tendencies*. Banglaprakash, Dhaka, 1914.
5. Huda, M. N. "Universalization of the Rebel". *Nazrul's Aesthetics and Other Aspects*. Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 2001.
6. Huda M. N. *I, The I*. Kobitabangla Publication. Dhaka, 2015.
7. Issue of Modern Review. "ON THE NATURE OF REALITY
Albert Einstein in Conversation with Rabindranath Tagore." January, 1931. file:///C:/Users/admin/Desktop/einstein_tagore.pdf. Accessed 25July, 2017
8. Kamal, Sajed. *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Selected Works*. Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 1999.