

Asserting Resistance in Nazrul’s “The Rebel” and Al-Shabbi’s “Will of Life”

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Abstract: The most valuable asset an oppressed subject loses, under all forms of abuse, is their sense of dignity. From colonial empires to postcolonial dictatorships, the fundamental objective of every tyrant's authority has been removing their subjects' humane existence and placing them in distorted realities where they can be grateful for just being alive. This paper looks at two notable pieces, Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam's (aka Nazrul) "The Rebel" and Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi's "Will of Life", as examples of anticolonial works living beyond their context. Despite their distinctive colonial experiences, both poets present a similar revolutionary zeal and desire for liberty. In particular, the study focuses on how the two poets sought to develop a consciousness of resistance in their readers in accordance with the Fanonian concepts of wretchedness and revolution. The paper compares how the two works attempt to decolonize the people they address and reclaim their national identity through the portrayal of the self, the assimilation of nature, and the representation of the divine.

Keywords: combat literature, decolonization, postcolonialism, resistance literature

1. Introduction

The history of colonization dates back as far as the fifteenth century and reached its height in the nineteenth century. The British and the French empires were the largest colonizers at the time and the expansion of the empires' territories was accompanied by tyranny and oppression to control the indigenous people of the conquered regions. By the turn of the twentieth century, the oppressed people began to revolt against centuries of subjugation, giving rise to what would subsequently be known as "decolonization". Decolonization occurs, first and foremost, "in our own minds", as stated by Wilson and Bird (2005: 4). An important part of decolonization arises from evoking an image of a liberated free nation in the minds of the colonized people through literature. This happens when colonized writers emerge in the literary field, creating new forms of "combat literature, revolutionary literature, [and] national literature" (Fanon 2004: 159). Literature, in this respect, is a conscious response against the hegemony of the colonizers. For colonized subjects with the ultimate dream of liberation, this type of literature vocalizes their desires, inspires them, and helps them to regain their lost pride.

Among countless colonized writers who served as the voices of their people's wishes and desires were Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam and Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi, two prominent literary figures of their nations. Born in 1899 in

West Bengal, Nazrul's rebellious spirit transcended its time and remains iconic to this date. His upbringing in the early 20th century took place during changing times in India, marking the beginning of the freedom movements that influenced his literary career. Nazrul devoted his writing to liberty, creating in the process his immortal work, "Birdrohi" ("The Rebel") in late 1921, which was published in several periodicals before being added to the *Agnibeena* anthology in 1922. The poem was an instant success for its rebellious vigor, becoming a slogan of resistance in British India and in Bangladesh's War of Independence 50 years later.

In Arabic literature, Abu Al-Qasim al-Shabbi is mostly recognized for writing the final two verses of Tunisia's national anthem. Born in 1909, he, like Nazrul, lived during a period of transition in his country, when intellectuals were attempting to gain independence, freedom and reformation for their nation. Although he did not live long, his 1933 masterpiece, "Iradat al-Hayat" ("Will of Life") remains relevant, resurfacing as an inspiration of resistance in the Jasmine Revolution of Tunisia in 2011.

Both Nazrul and al-Shabbi were warriors of decolonization. This battle starts, according to Edward Said (1994: 225), by reclaiming and renaming colonized assets. The most valuable asset the colonized lose, over decades of abuse, is their sense of identity. This is because the fundamental objective of every empire is to remove their colonial subjects' indigenous existence and place them within distorted images constructed by the settler or colonizer. Nazrul and al-Shabbi's works seek to "re clothe" their people with a refined and empowered self, restoring their societal pride and the will to defend it. This paper examines their most notable works, "The Rebel" and "Will of Life", as representations of anti-colonial poetry. It compares the two works' attempts at decolonizing their people's national identity through the portrayal of the self, the assimilation of nature, and the representation of the divine. In doing so, the paper traces the development of conscious resistance in Bengali and Arab colonial subjects and illustrates the set of shared religious values and beliefs as well as common colonial experience.

2. Resistance literature in the colonial context

When a culture is colonized, many of its traditions and practices disappear "because they are either hidden or replaced" (Dobie 2012: 205) by the dominant imperial force. In an attempt to preserve these eliminated traditions, colonized people use them as powerful tools of decolonization. Literature, being the linguistic and cultural pride of an indigenous population, becomes a means of asserting resistance against colonization. Identity, in particular, is a crucial aspect of decolonization, and, as such, of resistance literature. Despotic regimes ensure their domination by removing oppressed groups from their own essence, belittling their values, and attributing their traditions to "religious, magical, and fanatic behaviour" (Fanon 1965: 46). This causes, in the words of Saman Abdulqadir Dizayi (2019: 81), "a hazardous [identity] crisis inside the confinement of refusal and the conflict to demonstrate one's self to the others."

Of the many scholars discussing indigenous identity from a postcolonial perspective, Fanon's psychological approach to the colonized mindset is a

prominent example. A psychiatrist by profession, his view focuses on the psychological impact of implanting a sense of inferiority in colonized people, who, in their production of identity, follow the white colonizers and eliminate their own roots (2004: 80). Appropriating one of Fanon's book titles, it can be said that they hide their "Black skin [beneath] White Masks". Fanon thus emphasizes self-restoration as a fundamental factor for undergoing decolonization and gaining independence. The colonized world that Fanon (2004: 15) describes in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, is a "Manichaeic world" where "apartheid is but one method of compartmentalizing", and the first rule imposed on the colonized is "to remain in [its] place and not overstep its limits."

The distinction between the colonized and colonizer is not merely geographical, but also physical. This distinction enables the reduction of colonized subjects to "the state of an animal" and addressing them in zoological terms (Fanon 2004: 7). The colonized, then, are constantly being reminded of their inferior nature. Therefore, the burning desire for dignity among the colonized turns into "a running sore flinching from a caustic agent" who at least once a day "dream[s] of taking the place of the colonist" (Fanon 2004: 19, 16). Soon, the colonized intellectual realizes that his individual expression of this pain is not effective, leading him to "bunker down with the people during the liberation struggle" (Fanon 2004: 11) and creating in the process what would be called the literature of resistance.

According to Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the journey of literary resistance can be divided into three stages. The first stage is when writers absorb the colonizer's culture, producing works that copy the other culture's literature. Fanon calls this "the phase of full assimilation." In the second stage, they "cast their mind back" to their roots, resulting in pre-combat literature that addresses national legends and beliefs but within a borrowed mindset. That is, despite their subject being that of national representation, they are still using literary conventions set by the colonizer. It is only in the third stage that writers create national combat literature that "galvanize" the people to resist colonialism (2004: 159).

The national poet of Bangladesh, Kazi Nazrul Islam, can undoubtedly be regarded as an anti-colonial writer. Thousands of literary studies have been written by Bengali critics about the significance of Nazrul's poems in terms of shaping the history of Bangladesh, and his works are now part of school curricula at all educational levels. Internationally, however, very little is written in English about Nazrul's poetry due to lack of available translations. At an academic level, several occidental scholars of South-Asian literature have produced studies of his works, however, only a few discuss his poems in a colonial context.

Winston E. Langley was one of the first Westerners to introduce Nazrul to the English-speaking world and among the few to shed light on the characteristics of resistance in his works. In his seminar paper for the first Annual Kazi Nazrul Islam Lecture, Langley (2007) noted the objectives of Nazrul's poetry as "the empowerment of individuals and groups; the actual promotion of diversity itself; and the affirmation of the moral in human life and societies." Tanzin Sultana is another researcher who has analyzed Nazrul's decolonization efforts in his rebellious poems. She divides his works into five categories of resistance: "the

struggle against the British Empire, the struggle against exploiters, the struggle against class distinction, the struggle against social inequality, and the struggle against communal riot” (2020: 69). Bengali critic, Azfar Hussain, proclaims that Nazrul deserves to be named alongside poets such as Darwish, Hikmet, and Neruda, all of whom are regarded as icons of rebellion for their oppressed states. In his recent article, “Kazi Nazrul Islam: More than a rebel poet,” Hussain identifies Nazrul’s poetry as “a poem of assertions and identifications in the Saidian sense” (Dahaka Tribune, May 31, 2020). He further adds that Nazrul’s call for violent revolt also fits Fanon’s anti-imperialist resistance.

Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi, like Nazrul, is a widely celebrated poet in the Arab world, whose works still hold relevance and inspiration for contemporary readers. Many of his poems are part of literary courses in secondary schools in most Arab countries and, as such, numerous research papers have been written about him by students and scholars. Of all the Maghrebi modern authors, according to Marston Speight, al-Shabbi is the only one to attain this level of recognition from Arabs to date (1973: 178). While al-Shabbi’s poems are mainly labeled as romantic, they can also be positioned as anti-colonial. Iranian researchers, Morteza Reisi and Sayed Bassir, bring forth this argument by analyzing al-Shabbi’s works in their article titled “The reflection of the themes of resistance in Abul-Qasim al-Shabbi’s and Abul-Qasim Aref Qazvini’s poetry.” Specific themes galvanizing revolt against colonization in his works are presented through “the praise of liberty, war on colonizers, patriotism, and calling people to wakefulness” (2013: 1499). Relating the postcolonial revolution to the modern Tunisian revolution, Moulay Youness Elbousty (2013: 162–163) offers a new reading of al-Shabbi’s “Will of Life”, focusing on the syntax behind the title and rhyming in the poem as linguistic features of resistance.

3. Analysis

As demonstrated above, there are notable studies on Nazrul and al-Shabbi’s poetry in general. However, their works are rarely discussed from a postcolonial standpoint. Furthermore, no existing study has to date compared Nazrul and al-Shabbi together, despite the fact that they share common colonial backgrounds and produced similar decolonizing writing. This paper is one of the first attempts to draw a link between the two poets by focusing mainly on Nazrul’s “The Rebel” and al-Shabbi’s “Will of Life” and highlighting three dominant themes that serve as means of resisting colonization: defining the self, assimilating nature and representing the divine through the illustration of specific values and beliefs.

3.1 Defining the self

Demographically, during the British Raj era, India was home to more than 300 million people of different ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures (Walsh 2021). With only 20,000 imperial soldiers to impose authority over this immense population, British rulers adopted a “very cruel and useful game of ‘divide and rule’ policy” (Geeti 2016: 96). The colonial rule inflated social segregation, enhancing the already existing rift between feudal lords and peasants. Nazrul was by no means

the first Bengali writer to resist colonialism. However, given the intellectual gap between learned aristocrats and the illiterate common population, all previous resistance efforts had been limited to “a tiny section of the population which represents barely more than one percent” (Fanon 2004: 64). In this regard, Nazrul was the first major literary figure to give a voice to the peasants and lead their resistance, who according to Fanon, are the only real revolutionary (2004: 23). It is not surprising, then, to see the impact of Nazrul’s poems transcending political spheres to street riots. By addressing the long-ignored serfs’ intersectional marginalization, Nazrul endeavored to overcome the oppressive social structure that had contributed to preserving colonial rule.

As the core theme of “The Rebel” is representing the rebellious self, Nazrul plays the role of a spokesperson for all Indians, personifying them through the use of more than 147 ‘I’s repeated throughout the poem. ‘I’, for Nazrul, is a collective indicator of ‘us.’ At times, the ‘I’ is a male; at other times, it is female. It can be either a child or an adult. It is sometimes furious nature or a destructive divine creature, and other times a fragile human being. In all its forms, the multiple “I’s” have one single goal binding them together: to “uproot this subjugated world” (line 129). Placing all the people in the community side by side, Nazrul draws a powerful image of the colonized:

I’m ever indomitable, arrogant and cruel,
I’m the Dance-king of the Day of the Doom,
I’m the cyclone, the destruction!
I’m the great terror, I’m the curse of the world. (lines 14–16)

Nazrul daringly attributes the cruel characteristics of the colonizers to the colonized as a way of empowering the latter and regarding them as equals to the oppressor. However, he is also careful not to turn the Rebel into a colonial monster, hence the reason for bringing forth a different side of the speaker:

I’m the trembling passion of the first kiss,
the fleeting glance of the secret lover.
I’m the love of a restless girl, the jingling music of her bangles!
I’m the eternal child, the eternal adolescent (lines 76–80).

In the two above quotes, Nazrul’s intellectual talent manifests in how he asserts the destructive conditions of the oppressed people. An oppressed being is a tormented soul who is eager to uproot himself, even if it entails violence. This is not his true nature; however, as he is a sophisticated human being, who feels, desires, and dreams of beauty. The binary aspects of the Rebel are the result of the compartmentalized reality of oppression. It is also worth noting that Nazrul leans toward a visual or abstract description of tyranny, for example, through the description “Dance-king of the Day of the Doom” and the word “cyclone” because the colonized individuals witness subjugation with their eyes every day. He also uses more abstract words for power, i.e., “indomitable, arrogant and cruel”, “terror” and “curse”, as power is beyond the physical grasp, in the same way that the pain of subjugation is presented as an ineffable experience. On the other hand, his portrayal of the kinder side of the “I” evokes a more sensual perception. For example, images created by phrases such as “jingling music of her bangles”, “I’m

the unquenched summer thirst/the scorching rays of the sun”, and “I'm the northern breeze, the southern breeze/the callous eastwind” (lines 83–84, 87-88), remind the reader of their human senses and the joy they can experience through them.

Although al-Shabbi's poems do not address the peasant class in particular, like Nazrul, he attempts to celebrate the oppressed, as they represent the main readers of his poetry. When al-Shabbi began his writing journey in Arabic literature, Tunisian resistance was slowly taking shape with the establishment of the General Confederation of Tunisian Workers by Muhammad Ali El Hammi (Zayani 2015: 54), social reform writings by activist Tahar Haddad (Sabra 2010), and the launch of Habib Bourguiba's political career, who would subsequently lead the nation to independence in 1956 (Murphy). It was an opportune time for al-Shabbi to use his poetry as a catalyst for uprooting French domination. Al-Shabbi was never a member of any political party in Tunisia. However, he was a humanist and desired to bring an end to the injustice Arab citizens faced and voice their humanity.

Al-Shabbi opens the "Will of Life" with a very clear assertion of his goal, i.e., liberating mankind, “If, one day, the people wills to live/Then fate must obey” (lines 1–2). The poem ends by restating this objective, “If to life souls aspire/Then fate must obey” (lines 126–127). Even with the title of the poem, al-Shabbi enforces the “use [of] a certain syntax” (Fanon 1961: 8) to convey his resistance. The title in Arabic comprises two nouns, the indefinite ‘will’ and the definite ‘life.’ Joined together, the two nouns form a single meaning “will of life”, stressing its definiteness. As such, al-Shabbi, through his title, indicates that the will to resist brings definiteness to the life of the colonized. Elbousty puts forward this point by evaluating various translations of the title. He summarizes that al-Shabbi considers life valueless if there is no ‘will’ to give it momentum (2013: 161).

In contrast to the dramatic title and the furious beginning and closing of the poem, the middle section is a gentle depiction of a dreamy, idyllic, and free life that people should create for themselves, instead of the one they are living under colonial rule. Both Nazrul and al-Shabbi aim to build a personal connection with their readers, echoing the word “I” countless times throughout their respective poems. Whereas Nazrul attempts to identify his readers as a means to unite them, al-Shabbi evokes a yearning for beauty to bring his readers together. The desire for beauty is a form of resistance to al-Shabbi, because only by eliminating tyranny, corruption, and colonialism can one enjoy a beautiful life. The following lines are a demonstration of this vision:

I'm thirsty for light over the boughs!
 I'm thirsty for the shade under the trees!
 I'm thirsty for the spring in the meadows
 Singing and dancing over the flowers!
 I'm thirsty for the birds' tune
 For the breeze's whisper, and the rain's melody!
 I'm thirsty for the universe! Where is existence?
 When will I see the anticipated world? (lines 79–86)

In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon (1986: 9) claims that “a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that

language.” In accordance, al-Shabbi uses language to compose the beauty of an independent nation and affirms the will to achieve it. The deliberate use of the word “thirsty” is important to note, as thirst is both an indication of desire and need. The reader is not just wishing for a free world, but also urgently wants to achieve it at all costs, like the urgency of giving water to a thirsty person.

To summarize, both Nazrul and al-Shabbi address their colonized people throughout their respective poems using a dichotomous portrayal of the colonized subjects. This reminds us that, first and foremost, destruction and violence are common features of oppression and not of the oppressed. The colonized are human individuals who desire a joyful life that can only come through “concession from the colonial authorities, but never a compromise” (Fanon 2004: 92). Peace is not the goal of the rebel; rather, it is the repossession of the indigenous culture, which has either been stolen or displaced. This sense of repossession can also be seen in the sense of assimilating nature in the defense of the nation, a prominent theme in both “The Rebel” and “Will of Life”.

3.2 Assimilating nature in the defense of the nation

The indigenous land and its nature are the material aspects of colonization. All conquest begins with the primary goal to exploit the land, and all resistance is created to protect the homeland. The land is the common ground on which every one of “us” stands for “I” and “you.” If, for Nazrul, “I” serves to frame the poem, then nature in al-Shabbi’s “Will of Life” is the essence of the poem. Al-Shabbi encountered various Tunisian landscapes throughout his life, beginning with his place of birth, Tozeur, a city celebrated for its picturesque landscapes. He relocated across six cities during his childhood because of his father’s job as a judge, before finally spending significant years of his adulthood in the hilly Ayn Darahim region to improve his health (Speight 1973: 178). Embraced by his desire for freedom, the gifted al-Shabbi adopted a profound poetic style that would become a ferocious weapon against a totalitarian empire.

Through nature, al-Shabbi stresses the determination to be emancipated from colonization and to recreate an ideal world free of injustice. Nature in al-Shabbi’s “Will of Life” has two primary functions: to empower and to shelter. The first role is evident in his depiction of longing for nature’s beauty as the reason for resisting, “And he who is not embraced by life’s longing/Evaporates into its air and fades away” (lines 5–6). Nature, in al-Shabbi’s poem, also acts as a spiritual master who teaches humanity how to resist. This mentor/mentee connection is very intimate in the “Will of Life,” where the latter is found to be asking questions of the former, demonstrating a two-way relationship. This relationship is highlighted in several lines, e.g., “And Earth said to me—when I asked her” (line 23), and “I asked the night: “Will Life/ever bring back to wilted blossoms” (lines 41–42). The second task of nature, as a refuge, is visible in various illustrations of its inviting qualities. One example of this is this joyous line, “Behold! The universe is alive; it loves life” (line 29). Ronak Husni analyzes al-Shabbi’s poetically romantic features, including praising nature, and claims that nature in his poems often represents childhood. Children, by virtue of their innocence, possess a free will that does not abide by any

constraints. Thus, “al-Shabbi returns to nature as a refuge from [colonized people’s] deadly apathy and resignation” (Husni 1995: 90) and to rekindle child-like freedom. That is, amidst the tyranny present in subjugated nations, local nature provides solace for the oppressed local inhabitants.

Similarly, Nazrul also reflects countless Bengali landscapes throughout his poem to remind the reader of their homeland and the ultimate goal to free it. Sometimes, he alludes to the mesmerizing beauty of nature, its “murmur of overflowing water, [and the] Hindol dance of rolling waves” (line 70), warming the reader’s heart with affection for their country. In most cases, however, land and nature in “The Rebel” is depicted violently, evoking the urge to destroy colonial tyranny. Such an instance can be found at the opening of the poem:

Proclaim, Hero,
 Proclaim: I raise my head high!
 Before me bows down the Himalayan peaks!
 Proclaim, Hero,
 Proclaim: rending through the sky,
 Surpassing the moon, the sun, the planets, the stars
 Piercing through the earth, the heavens, the cosmos,
 Ripping apart the Almighty's throne,
 Have I risen, the eternal wonder of the creator of the universe (lines 1–9).

Nazrul is, by no means, underestimating nature’s force by presenting it as inferior to human power in the above lines. In fact, by depicting a Rebel that is able to tame nature, he is giving the speaker an ultimate heroic image that can overcome any force including that of the universe. Aminul Haque and Tasnia Talukder (2019: 1960) interpret nature in these lines as a superior master whom a student wishes to surpass: “he learns the greatness from ‘Himalayan’, magnanimity from the ‘sky’, takes light for life from the ‘sun’, ‘moon’ and ‘stars.’” This view is further supported by Nazrul’s characterization of the reader as a “hero.” Oppressed people who have been subjected to long-term systematic disparagement tend to develop a submissive attitude and inherently accept the superiority of the colonizers. In a Fanonian sense, this is viewed as colonial alienation. Fanon (2004: 163) calls on colonized poets to “clearly define the people, the subject of [their] creation” because only by realizing their alienation can one move “resolutely forward.” Nazrul successfully takes on this duty by identifying his people as “hero(s)” and associating them with their own landscapes. The colonized people and nature are united in his poem, where the only alienated subject is the colonizer.

In short, for both al-Shabbi and Nazrul, nature, and its forces beyond human control, are a manifestation of the liberty that the writers aspire for their people. Despite their contrasting ways of describing this nature, calm and bright for al-Shabbi and furious and fearful for Nazrul, the two poets commonly respect it as the master of humankind. It is in the untamable aspect of nature and its unpredictability that one can find the ultimate rebellion. Likewise, pronouncing the values and beliefs of the colonized through the representation of the divine can serve as a form of rebellion or resistance.

3.3 Representing the divine

Religious beliefs were another aspect of division in European colonies. This issue existed not only between the Christian colonizer and the colonized “infidel,” but also within the multi-faith pockets of colonized society itself. India, in particular, includes several religions, the two dominant among them being Hinduism and Islam. Hindus were the majority in most areas of Raj India; however, in Nazrul’s Bengal, they were the minority but possessed most of the land in this part of the country. This complicated class structure in Bengal, alongside the crossover of ownership and religion, gave the British the right set of circumstances to justify colonization. Abrar Zhaoor and Munir Gujjar question whether there was any religious division in India prior to colonialism and whether this division was itself a colonial tactic of keeping people from uniting. They argue that British rule classified any social strife in India as being religious, because of their “Orientalists’ assumption that the fundamental source of division in Indian society was religion” (2019: 61). To oppose this intolerant sentiment the British promoted, Nazrul merges spiritual signs related to both religions in his poem, thereby symbolizing a unified rebellion. Nazrul had a religious upbringing during his childhood in his Muslim provincial family; however, while pursuing literature, he came in contact with Hindu authors who dominated the literary scene. The dichotomy of his spiritual encounters allowed Nazrul to develop a mystic understanding of religion beyond any specific form of practice, which is reflected in his poems.

The speaker of “The Rebel” presents himself as a person who believes in all divine creations emanating from different religions, making all readers feel a sense of belonging. For instance, when referring to power, he mentions “the fiery wing of the angel Gabriel” (Nazrul: line 100) and “the headless Chandi” (line 116). Gabriel is the messenger angel of Allah, the Muslim God, who is described as “The one possessor of strength” (The Holy Quran 53: 5). Chandi, on the other hand, is the brutal, powerful, and evil-destroyer form of Shakti, the Hindu Goddess of power (Britannica 2015). Mohammad Nurul Huda, a translator and researcher of Nazrul’s poetry, links Nazrul’s philosophy as an activist to his interest in Sufi principles. In his explanation, Huda writes that although there is an apparent incompatibility between Nazrul’s desire for an equal world (and, accordingly, equal worldly possessions) and Sufism (which does not approve of any worldly gain), it is in this literary puzzle that Nazrul presents the duality of the self and the soul. The self, in this case, is the physical human form, while the soul reflects abstract existence. For Nazrul, the desire of freeing the physical self from subjugation is accompanied by surrendering the soul to the divine law of the universe. His speaker’s journey from rebellion to freedom, and then to submission, is what can be seen as the colonized self-reconstruction from a Fanonian view. In fact, Fanon’s writings bring to us the complicated situation of religion as both an enabler of subjugation and a function of unity, as was the case in the Algerian war of independence. In discussing the problem of religion in relation to Fanon, An Yountae (2022) quotes Federico Settler, who stated in his work “Religion in the work of Frantz Fanon” that Fanon “recognized the significance of the sacred in cohering social collectivities and in the recovery of the black self” (2009: 5). Yountae further adds:

[T]he sacred molds the spirit and movement of decolonial resistance in the colony. But unlike the institutionalized forms (and understandings) of religion, the diverse registers of the sacred usually take murky shapes. And at times, they are presented as antitheses to the sacred, that is, as a disavowal of the dominant notion of the sacred (and of religion more broadly). (2022)

In this context, Nazrul's Rebel also "tear[s] apart the chest of the whimsical god!", rejecting the presupposed notion of divinity and elevating himself to "God of gods, the supreme humanity" (lines 143–119). In accordance with a Sufist notion of unity with God in the purest form of surrender and worship, the Rebel becomes one with god(s), hence declaring the self as the god.

Similar to Nazrul, religion also plays a part in al-Shabbi's struggle for liberation. Al-Shabbi's homeland, Tunisia, is predominantly Islamic. Colonial powers used religious justification as one of the objectives for conquest and, in many cases, the colonization process began with missionaries. Likewise, as mentioned above in the case of Fanon's "Algeria", the warriors of freedom in Tunisia used to define themselves as Jihadis, an Islamic term for "fighter", as resisting the occupier was both a national and a religious mission for them. Al-Shabbi's father was a Qadi (a judge in a Sharia court) who adopted a conservative perspective in which religious teaching was part of al-Shabbi's upbringing. In adulthood, upon entering higher educational institutes, al-Shabbi explored secular doctrines, which allowed him to form unconventional views on religion. To him, religion was not only a matter of believing and practicing certain rituals but was a cultural asset to implement in his artistic creations.

Divine power in al-Shabbi's "Will of Life" is represented in two divergent ways, i.e., as the mystic power behind the beauty of nature and the colonizing regime's fate that shall be overturned. Fate and will are both crucial words that al-Shabbi uses in delivering his message. In its literal meaning, fate is the agency by which "all events, or some events in particular, are unalterably predetermined from eternity" (Oxford English Dictionary), similar to the concept of faith in Islamic religion and Arabic culture. Contrastingly, will is defined as "the exercising of the mind with conscious intention towards initiating a chosen action; volition" (Oxford English Dictionary). This definition is situated in between the struggle of the intention of the will vs the predetermination of fate, where differences in beliefs occur and the agency to change exists. Al-Mabkhout reads al-Shabbi's entire poem as being multi-layers of antimoniactal structures; where the struggle of fate and will is the macro antonym, while images such as that of light vs darkness are the micro antonyms that demonstrate the distance between the two axes. He further adds that the poem creates an illusionary map where fate and will are positioned upside down, with fate being the bottom pit where humanity is expected to rise from and will reflecting the desired goal. In doing so, al-Shabbi is evoking a self-consciousness in his readers for determining how to navigate within this space. Unlike Nazrul, al-Shabbi is not seeking to overthrow God or to unite with him; rather, he is attempting to negotiate with God the limits of destiny and life against the common threat of colonial subjugation.

The opening of al-Shabbi's poem was, in fact, controversial for several Islamic scholars who found its statement to reject the authority of God; however, this accusation does not hold, given that his poem also indirectly praises God and his creations. Such an example can be found in a long eulogy reflecting on the concept of light:

Be blessed by the light, and welcome
 Young age and life's affluence.
 He whose dreams worship the light
 Is blessed by the light wherever he appears
 Here you have the sky, here you have the light
 And here you have the blooming dreamy soil. (lines 99–104)

Rimayatul Millati (2016: 26) elucidates light in the poem as the "light of god", because the Holy Quran states, "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth" (24: 35). Hence, light, in the above quoted lines, is God himself. In other words, al-Shabbi's poem is first and foremost a celebration of life, a life that is given by divinity. Unlike Nazrul's concern with unity through religion, al-Shabbi considers religion as the driving force for reaching the desired life. God, here, is not an opponent to be defeated nor a totem to be unified with, but an ally who assists subjects in reaching their goals.

4. Conclusion

In many ways, Nazrul and al-Shabbi shared aspirations and a purpose in their literary production. Hailing from colonized countries at around the same time (the early 20th century), they share many mutual themes in their celebrated works "The Rebel" and "Will of Life". They both played a pivotal role in the decolonization movements that their respective countries experienced during this time. In a Fanonian sense, their poetry is "combat literature" (Fanon 2004: 159) that expresses the will to exist as a liberated nation. By attributing nationalist pride to indigenous assets, both Nazrul and al-Shabbi attempted to reconstruct the demeaned identity of their people. However, the two poets presented their own views using unique styles on three shared topics, the self, nature, and religion.

The most striking feature of Nazrul's "The Rebel" is how the colonized self embodies the pain of the oppressed people. Nature of the land, the second theme of the poem, is presented as the inspiration of power to oppose the subjugation of the colonized and aspire for freedom. While religion in this poem assists the theme of unity, Nazrul sought to diminish the dividing lines between the two main religions in conflict, Islam and Hinduism. Al-Shabbi, on the other hand, in depicting the self throughout "Will of Life", advocates for overcoming all types of suppression and galvanizes the human will. Nature is the most notable element in the poem, where it functions as a source of strength and a refuge for the abused. Finally, al-Shabbi uses religion as a cultural asset to distinguish the self from the colonizer and asserts the position of the human above both religion and the ruling powers.

This study, the first to compare two modern poets from Arab and Bengali literature, can be used as a basis for further comparative research on this topic. Examining other works of the two discussed poets can potentially provide many

new findings. In a broader sense, this work can be extended to examine other genres and compare between postcolonial Arabic and Bengali literary works.

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