

# The Eyes Have It: Naeem Mohaiemen's *Kazi in Nomansland* and the Crisis of History

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MICHAEL BILLIG, IN HIS INFLUENTIAL BOOK *BANAL NATIONALISM*, challenges orthodox conceptions of nationalism that present it as a discourse that is always exceptional, that is solely the domain of extremists or separatists populating the nation's ideological fringe, or that suddenly emerges as a rallying cry at moments of national crisis, like war or a terrorist attack.<sup>1</sup> This approach, he argues, focuses on “hot nationalism”, rendering invisible the subtle effects of many trivial everyday representations and acts—flags, currency, language—through which a national imaginary is constructed, reinforced and ultimately normalized. Billig collectively terms this “banal nationalism”. Though he does not discuss them, stamps, as products authorized by the state that surreptitiously disseminate elements of the national imaginary—flags, symbols, maps, portraits of political leaders and military heroes, titans of science and industry, and exemplars of arts and culture—both within and outside its borders, are another excellent instrument of “banal nationalism”.<sup>2</sup>

Naeem Mohaiemen, who engages with history as both artist and academic, often draws on this minor register of “banal nationalism”—which is especially hospitable to an un-disciplined amateur such as himself<sup>3</sup>—to challenge the discipline's master narratives and temper its grand aspirations to objective truth.<sup>4</sup> It is hardly surprising then that



1.  
Naeem Mohaiemen, *Kazi in Nomansland (postal)*, 2008.  
Stamp sculptures from  
India: 2.8 x 4 cm;  
Bangladesh: 3.8 x 4.5 cm;  
Pakistan: 3.4 x 4.2 cm.  
Collection of the British  
Museum.



*Kazi in Nomansland* (2008), his two-part installation on the fascinating life and legacy of Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976), began with an unusual and unexpected philatelic fact: the revolutionary Bengali poet has the unique honour of being the only person ever featured on postage issued by Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Presented at the Durbar Hall in Ernakulam, Mohaiemen’s installation was one of two key works inspired by postage stamps included in “Whorled Explorations”, the 2014 Kochi-Muziris Biennale curated by artist Jitish Kallat.<sup>5</sup> The focus of one of the most popular childhood hobbies, stamps—as instruments of “banal nationalism” with a decidedly global reach—easily transcend the territorial limits of the nation-state while still projecting its self-image, and, as such, were apt vehicles through which Kallat, a fellow un-disciplined amateur, could question, challenge and deconstruct conventional cartographic representations of the world, an important curatorial theme of his exhibition.

The first part of Mohaiemen’s installation consists of three stacks of these stamps, one for each country. Those issued by India and Pakistan both feature the same canonical portrait of Nazrul Islam’s boyishly hairless face framed by long, thick black tresses, while Bangladesh goes with a different, if no less iconic, image of the young poet with shorter hair and a manly moustache. These modest sculptures provide irrefutable material evidence of the competing claims of contested neighbours, as each, at different points in their histories, somewhat cynically co-opted the firebrand poet for its emerging national narrative, transforming a real-life revolutionary into a one-dimensional national icon. The irony is that Nazrul Islam, driven by a deeply felt humanism, was avowedly cosmopolitan and a passionate critic of communalism, as his uncompromising verses amply demonstrate.<sup>6</sup> Though staunchly anticolonial, he remained suspicious of nationalism and vehemently opposed the division of the subcontinent along religious lines.

The installation’s second part consists of five narrow horizontal C-prints that focus on the poet’s later years. In 1942, a mysterious illness left Nazrul Islam unable to speak, write, or communicate with those around him. He spent the remaining three decades of his life in involuntary isolation, cut off mentally if not physically from the world. Enlarged and cropped from archival photographs from this period, each presents a slice of history, isolating Nazrul Islam’s expressive eyes. They invert a technique commonly used in pre-digital print media to ensure a person’s anonymity by obscuring their eyes with a thin black strip, as if, as Shakespearean “windows to the soul”, they were the key to identity. Each print is given a distinct tint to distinguish

2. Department of Posts (DoP) India, first day cover of commemorative stamp set on “Linguistic Harmony of India” with the stamps featuring Kazi Nazrul Islam (pictured here), Ramdhari Singh “Dinkar”, Jhaverchand Kalidas Meghani and Rambriksh Benipuri, September 14, 1999.



3a-e.  
Naeem Mohaiemen,  
*Kazi in Nomansland (eyes)*,  
2008. Suite of five digital  
C-prints; each 8.9 x 63.5 cm.  
Collection of Dipti Mathur.

it as a unique moment in history, and is accompanied by a keyword or phrase and a short caption that contextualizes the source photograph, but does so somewhat allusively. The veracity of the bits of historical information Mohaiemen provides is sometimes put into question by his provocative and speculative asides, which pushes us to consider the perspective of the mute Nazrul Islam. A tabula rasa, his silent body, cast into no-man's land, becomes an unwitting locus for the writing of history and, together, text and image narrate the somewhat bizarre story of how he came to be Bangladesh's national poet in the years following its independence from Pakistan.

India's claims over Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet par excellence and author of its national anthem, were unquestionable. And for Pakistan the choice had been obvious—Muhammad Iqbal, a stalwart of Urdu poetry, to whom the origin of the idea of a separate homeland for the subcontinent's Muslims is commonly attributed—though, when the country's two wings were still intact, it had also championed Nazrul Islam as the Muslim alternative to the “Hindu” Tagore, as its stamp featuring him proves. As a Bengali Muslim, Nazrul Islam was perfect for the newly independent Bangladesh, which, though the end result of two distinct identity-driven separatist impulses, was established as a secular republic. The poet epitomized this ideal while simultaneously reinforcing the nation's religious as well as linguistic majoritarian preferences. The only problem was that he lived with his family in Calcutta. In 1972, Bangladesh invited Nazrul Islam to visit Dhaka as a state guest. Though impossible to confirm, he seemed happy in the villa in Dhanmondi where he was housed and where he continued to stay until the 1975 military coup that deposed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, when he was transferred to a cramped room at P.G. Hospital. He died there a year later. Though an Indian citizen, his body was not repatriated to his family in India. Bureaucratic red tape and inexplicable travel delays ensured that they were unable to attend the funeral, allowing Nazrul Islam to be ceremonially interred in Dhaka, the nation's poet finally laid to rest in its own hallowed ground.<sup>7</sup> Primarily black-and-white, the fifth print of Mohaiemen's installation is taken from a photograph of Nazrul Islam lying in state at his funeral. His eyes, finally closed, appear on the left. On the right, a vertical red band draws our attention to another male figure, partially obscuring his sunglasses-covered eyes. This is General Ziaur Rahman who, as leader of the ruling military junta, presided over and, most likely, orchestrated the ceremony and, as Mohaiemen's caption reminds us, would, himself, be dead in five years.

Installed so that Nazrul Islam's eyes in each print line up vertically, Mohaiemen's installation beseeches us to repeatedly interrogate these eyes, searching them for traces of an account he is unable to narrate, for any evidence of a response—be it acknowledgement, capitulation or protest—to the cynical machinations his silent body was subjected to in the name of nationalism. This body serves as a poignant metaphor for other voiceless victims of history and politics, of lands repeatedly and arbitrarily carved up according to the whims, wishes and desires of colonial administrators, nationalist leaders and founding fathers, and of people whose lives, families, communities and histories were cleaved asunder by those drawn borders.<sup>8</sup> And the undeniable inaccessibility of Nazrul Islam's eyes recalls the unflinching stare of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920), Walter Benjamin's famous Angel of History, and reminds us that the truth of history is always elusive and what remains of it is often mute.<sup>9</sup> It is the thankless task of the historian to find ways to hear the testimony of the past's many silent and silenced witnesses.

#### NOTES

- 1 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage Publications, 1995).
- 2 Henio Hoyó, "Posting Nationalism: Postage Stamps as Carriers of Nationalist Messages", in Joan Burbick and William Gass, eds., *Beyond Imagined Uniqueness: Nationalisms in Contemporary Perspectives* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 67–92.
- 3 The phrase "un-disciplined amateur" is not meant to be dismissive. Rather, "un-disciplined" references Mohaiemen's abiding commitment to a cross-disciplinary approach that does not sacrifice rigour for breadth. And "amateur" does not suggest a lack of skill or aptitude but acknowledges an engagement that is driven by sheer love (the Latin root of the word is *amare* or to love) rather than financial compensation or professional accomplishment.
- 4 For a related discussion of Mohaiemen's use of what Lauren Berlant calls the "silly archive", see Murtaza Vali, "Action Man: Introducing//Naeem Mohaiemen", *Modern Painters*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (February 2012), pp. 44–46.
- 5 The other was Kader Attia's *Independence Disillusionment* (2014), an installation of 26 paintings based on stamps issued by countries in West Asia and Africa shortly after they achieved independence. Flush with the optimism of liberation and in the early throes of nation-building, these stamps featured images of space exploration and moon landings, utopian visions that marked the frontiers of modern science and progress at the time. Attia's uncanny contemporary retrieval of these archival images underscores the bitter eventual failure of those aspirations.
- 6 Another recent work that uses postage stamps to explore histories and politics of postcolonial nationalism and liberation movements in Africa is the Otolith Group's essay-film *In the Year of the Quiet Sun* (2013) and related timeline installation *Statecraft* (2014).
- 7 For a general discussion of Nazrul Islam's poetry see Priti Kumar Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam: Poetry and History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007). For a discussion of this installation in relationship to Nazrul Islam's poetry see the related essay by Naeem Mohaiemen, "Kazi in Nomansland", in Murtaza Vali, ed., *Manual for Treason* (Sharjah: Sharjah Art Foundation, 2011), pp. 76–95.
- 8 In a way, Nazrul Islam's fate uncannily echoes that of Bishan Singh, the tragic protagonist of Saadat Hasan Manto's famous short story "Toba Tek Singh", an asylum inmate who, unable to process the horrific reality of Partition and pick a side to belong to, perishes instead on the "bit of earth which had no name", the no-man's land of the border in between. See Saadat Hasan Manto, "Toba Tek Singh", in *Mottled Dawn: Fifty Sketches and Stories of Partition* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1997), pp. 1–10.
- 9 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 253–64.

ŏŸŹ! Naeem Mohaiemen. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better.Â Memory and the disjuncture between what I remember and how it must have been because I think that can't be how I remember it and my family history is always in all my projects because it's the thing I understand and it's the thing I can enter in any way I want and I feel very intimate with that history.Â Essays on Bangladesh history include "Muktijuddho: Polyphony of the Ocean",[11] "Accelerated Media and the 1971 Genocide",[12] "Musée Guimet as Proxy Fight", [13] "Mujtaba Ali: Amphibian Man" (The Rest of Now, Rana Dasgupta ed.),[14] "Mujib Coat" (Bidoun journal),[15] and "Everybody wants to be Singapore" (Carlos Motta's The Good Life).[16] He wrote the chapter on religious and ethnic minorities.