

Patriotism and Zeal for Social Reformation in Henry Louis Vivian Derozio's Poetry

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Abstract:

There were very few poets in India in the 1st half of the 19th century who genuinely could reflect upon and give a direction to what way Indian poetry should move and in such an arena Henry Louis Vivian Derozio could prove himself as a great poet though his poetic career was cut short by his untimely death. He can well be regarded as a nature poet and a follower of British poetry, but the most vital aspects of his poetry are his patriotism and spirit for social reformation. These are the two dominant aspects which have made him immortal in Indian poetry in English. Derozio is widely acknowledged as the first Indo-Anglian poet for he pioneered the vogue of poetry writing in English language incorporating themes which were essentially concerned with Indian life and society. There is a strong justification to say that it was he who set the stage for succeeding Indian poets. This paper mainly investigates his patriotism as well as his zeal for social reformation which find expression in the poetry of Derozio. For making a discussion on the aspects in question, his poems, namely "The Harp of India", "To India – My Native Land", "The Fakeer of Jungheera", "Freedom to the Slave" and "The Orphan Girl" have been taken for discussion and analysis.

Keywords: Derozio, Indo-Anglian poets, Indian poetry in English, patriotism, social reformation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian poetry in English, though looks like a homogeneous entity, is broadly a combination of two distinct types of poetry written in English in two distinct periods – one is the period that ranges from the moment the first poem in English came to light to that point of time when India got independence in 1947 and the other is the period that has continued since the moment of India's independence, which can roughly be called the postcolonial era. The dichotomy between the two types of poetry is evident if considered how far they are similar to and detached from British poetry. The independence of India in 1947 not only gave the country political as well as administrative freedom, it also freed the country from western hegemony in matters of language, culture and tradition and more particularly from those thoughts that got reflected in Lord Macaulay's minute on education enacted in 1835 (Macaulay). The poetry written during the first period was to a great extent influenced by British poetry. While Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) is widely acknowledged as the first Indo-Anglian poet, Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) can well be placed as the first foundational figure in postcolonial era who started the vogue of writing poetry in Indian English and in Indian tone. Ezekiel's "Very Indian Poem in English" is a standing example of how he answered to the abominating critique on Indian poetry in English which in turn established Indian poetry in English as distinct from British poetry in matters of themes, style and tone (Bezbaruah). Ezekiel's poetry is an answer to those who always criticized Indian poetry in English lacking in fervour and zeal like those of British and Irish poets.

The poets who belonged to the of the first period, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833), Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838-1894), Toru Dutt (1856-1877), Robindra Nath Tagore (1861-1941), Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861-1946), Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) and Mrs. Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) were all great poets and among all these Indo-Anglian poets Tagore was a dazzling sun who was awarded Nobel Prize in Literature for his *Gitanjali* in 1913 which was published in London in 1912 (Learning English Literature Timeline). However, the charge levelled against all these poets is that, most of them were influenced by or imitated the British and Irish poets because of which though the themes of their poetry were Indian, the style they adopted was alien. However, the importance of Derozio as poet lies in the fact that he pioneered the vogue of poetry writing in English language incorporating themes which were essentially Indian and there is a strong rationale to say that it was he who set the stage for subsequent Indian poets. Derozio wrote a number of poems on a variety

of themes which were directly or indirectly influenced or inspired by the romantic movement in England. However, there are a few poems which avowedly express his love for the native land and patriotic zeal as well as the spirit for social reformation. This paper will briefly focus on how the patriotic voices as well as the spirit for social reformation find expression in the poems of Derozio.

II. PATRIOTIC ZEAL IN DEROZIO'S POETRY

Derozio (18 April, 1809 - 26 December, 1931) was born in Calcutta of a father who was Portuguese and a mother who was English. He spent the short span of his life in this city of India. The Euro-Asian origin has a lot of bearings in making him as a poet. There were many families in that time who had mixed racial identity and it deprived their offspring in getting recognition from either of the races. In other words, they suffered from the loss of home land and from a feeling of alienation as well as abandonment. However, the British colonization in India gave them opportunity to identify with India as their native land. Hence, what is found in Derozio's poetry is a kind of poetic style that is pertinent to poets, such as Thomas Moore and Byron. The style of Derozio's poetry, however, may have its root in British poetry, but thematically his poetry is concerned with Indian life and culture. Derozio's poetry is marked by his love for India, the land which gave him an identity. According to K.R. Ramachandran Nair, he was the 'first spark that kindled the flame of awakening which soon transformed itself into an inferno cleansing and rejuvenating the masses who sinned in submitting to decadence, having forgotten the awareness and dignity of the self' (Nair 24).

In "The Harp of India" the poet presents a dichotomy between the past and the present of India. In the very beginning of the poem he refers to an unstrung and unattended harp hanging on 'yon withered bough' (1) which once produced sweet music and through the abandoned harp the poet lets the Indians realize how the past glory of India has become faded, unacknowledged and unsung in the present like that of the forgotten music of the harp and how they have refused to realize what they have lost. Because of the sheer neglect and failure to discover the glorious past of the country, it has become a 'ruined monument on desert plain' (7). The poet likens the singing, admiring and acknowledging of the past glory of India with the music of the harp. The poet feels that many worthy people existed in the past who were worthier than the poet and who could play the 'harmonious chords' (9) and there were many admirers as well. The poet expresses that many such 'harmonious chords' played by those immortal hands lying still in the grave brought glory and pride to the land. He feels that though those hands are no more, their divine notes are still alive and they can be wakened once again through these notes. The last line of the poem 'Harp of my country, let me strike the strain' expresses his keen desire to be the one who is instrumental in making a discourse on the lost glory of India and make a humble effort to create and recreate songs of India through his verses.

Similar to "The Harp of India" is his "To India – My Native Land", which is also a sonnet and is reflective of how his country despite having glorious past in which the land was 'worshipped as a deity' (line 3) has become a 'fallen country' (line 14). According to the poet, there was a time when the magnificence of India was encircled by a 'a beauteous halo' (line 2). The poet finds that the glory which India possessed in the past and the reverence people had for the country have been diminished. So, he questions, 'Where is thy glory, where the reverence now?' (line 4). The poet further says that the 'eagle pinion' (line 5) of the country has been chained down and she has been allowed to grovel from the lowly dust. It is such a condition in which even the minstrels have also been incapacitated to weave wreath for the country, except singing the 'sad story of thy misery' (line 8). The poet's referring to 'eagle' bears a lot of significance in Indian context in the sense that while it is a symbol of fear, respect and awe, it is also associated with Hindu mythology where Garuda, which is a mix of an eagle and human features, is considered to be the vehicle of Lord Vishnu. The poet believes that still there exists some fragments of the past glory and reverence for the country rolled from one age to the other which according to him is 'wrecks sublime' (line 11) and which lie hidden from human eye. He wants to dive into past to collect all unseen as well as unacknowledged sublime fragments from the wreckage and he believes that it will recompense his labour and will be a kind wish for his country.

'Well—let me dive into the depths of time
And bring from out the ages, that have rolled
A few small fragments of these wrecks sublime
Which human eye may never more behold
And let the guerdon of my labour be,
My fallen country! One kind wish for thee!' (lines 9-14)

Both the two poems “The Harp of India” and “To India – My Native Land” are expressive of the poet’s patriotic spirit in the sense that since India is his native land, he must be devoted to and avowedly work for the prosperity and upliftment of the land. This is where Derozio has proved himself to be patriotic. Though both these two poems are sonnets, within the ambit of a sonnet he has successfully dealt with the past and the present of India to give a proper direction for the future. In “The Harp of India” when he talks of the music which ‘once was sweet’ (line 3), metaphorically he refers to Indian culture and heritage which once were very rich. India bears the fruits of thousands of years old culture and tradition. The two great epics - *the Mahabharata* and *the Ramayana* – and *the Vedas, the Upanishadas* etc. reflect the glorious past that India enjoys. Apart from that a number of renowned literary personalities, like Sudraka and Kalidasa contributed to the everlasting glory of ancient India. Derozio perceives that somehow the past glory of India is in the face of decadence like ‘ruined monument on desert plain’ (line 7). So, while lamenting for the absence of those divine hands, he expresses his desire to ‘strike the strain’ (line 14). Likewise, in “To India – My Native Land” he emphasises on how India possesses unique history of being a deity encircled by a ‘a beauteous halo’. However, he perceives that the glory and fame of India has diminished with the passage of time. As a lover of the land he cannot refrain from reminding people of what the country has already lost in the course of time and how to find ways for reviving the lost glory.

III. SPIRIT FOR SOCIAL REFORMATION IN DEROZIO’S POETRY

As has already been referred to, Derozio belonged to the first half of the 19th century India, the period in which the British had already consolidated their footholds. It was also a period in which social reformation became an important aspect in the 19th century Indian Intellectual movement pioneered by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and which was followed by Derozio along with a number of intellectuals including Debendra Nath Tagore, Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen and many more. While his stay in Hindu College, Calcutta, Derozio, who was appointed as a teacher of English literature and History, he became vocal about orthodox social and religious systems in Hinduism. He was followed by a group of radical free thinkers of Bengal. Known as Young Bengal Movement, it was a radical movement for the reformation of Hindu society. Hence, he wanted to bring in some changes in the society by being vocal about the odds in the society, be it religious or societal. His seminal work “The Fakeer of Jungheera” is a standing example of his desire to see a rational India where women are not subdued or subjugated in the name of customs and traditions. The poem is a protest against *sati pratha*, the custom which compelled a woman to sacrifice her life in the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. The incorporation of theme like *sati pratha* in his poem makes Derozio the ‘greatest of teachers, pathfinder of rationalism, and forceful warrior against the practice of widow-burning’ (Chaudhuri xxi). It should be noted that India has a glorious past concerning the rights and respect to women, be it in the myths or in history. During the Vedic period women were considered to be equal to their male counterparts. A number of power-wielding women including Raziya Sultana, Mira Bai, Rani Lakshmi Bai etc. are standing examples of how women in the medieval India also enjoyed space as equal as that of a male. However, Derozio perceived that *sati pratha* was such a custom which made the women vulnerable. So, through his “The Fakeer of Jungheera” he wanted to portray the irrationality involved with the custom.

His “Freedom to the Slave” expresses the imaginary feelings of a just freed slave giving a clue to pip into slavery as one of the darkest chapters in human history. In this poem he ‘cherished freedom and had a fervour for liberty and equality’ (Verghese). His reference of the line ‘as the slave departs, the Man returns’ from Thomas Campbell’s poem “The Pleasure of Hope” metaphorically sets the context of Derozio’s poem signifying how slavery opposes freedom and how slaves are denied of human considerations. The poem starts with giving the feelings of a slave when he heard the first news of his being freed. The poet imagines that after hearing the news of the freedom his heart immediately started beating proudly and the noblest feelings of his soul started to glow at once, because this transformation would also free him from kneeling before his master. With the feelings of a man he looked above, perhaps, to thank heaven or to express his gratitude at the nearness of heaven as the ‘breath of heaven’ (line 9) started to blow freshly around him. His smile after looking at the wild birds is suggestive of how freedom makes one as happy as the wild birds which can fly anywhere or do anything at will. When he looks at the running stream and thinks of winds, birds and floods the very feeling of his freedom makes him cry in exultation with the words ‘I’m free as they!’ (line 16). The poet feels that slavery is the creation of the tyrants and is all praise for the generous people who have broken the chain of slavery to allow the ‘degraded man’ (line 27) to feel what freedom is.

“The Orphan Girl” is another poem authored by Derozio. The poem is about a young girl who happens to lose her parents. While drawing sympathy for the orphan girl, the poet makes the readers think of the society which often gives a deaf ear to the problems faced by the distressed. The concern of the poet is that, the girl is too immature to understand the harshness and cruelty that prevail in the world. The poet is in all sympathy for the girl not only for her being an orphan, but also for her lack of friends and relatives who can afford to give her food and shelter. In such a condition she will have to be the subject of harsh treatment for the society. The poet’s main

concern is with social security which is very much needed for securing the lives of the orphans and the destitute. Criticising the society, he says that while it deprives her from giving any respite from the pitiable condition in which the orphan girl has been subjected to, it will scorn her in the slightest deviation from the path of virtue. Through this poem the poet intends to show in what way people should think of those people who are helpless, penniless and socially insecure. So, he praises people 'who shelters an orphan from sorrow and shame!' (line 26). This poem of Derozio can also be considered as the reflection of the other side of the Indian society in the first half of the 19th century. His message is clear enough to understand that he seeks reformation in the society so that it learns how to sympathise with the poor and the helpless.

IV. CONCLUSION

Though Indian poetry in English in the postcolonial era has established itself as a separate entity distinct from the British counterpart and has increasingly achieved a prestigious place in the arena of world poetry, the poetry written in the late 18th and first half of the 19th century, more broadly Indian poetry in English written since its birth to the independence of the country has still to get a proper place so far as the discourse on Indian poetry is concerned. Still there is paucity of proper attention to the poets, like Derozio, who practically set the stage for subsequent poets in Indian poetry in English. Even "The Fakeer of Jungheera", which is Derozio's 'longest and most challenging poem', lacks adequate discourses and readers are bound to struggle for a narrative on it which 'may be read in isolation from the tradition or history reading' (Paranjape). In such a scenario it is very much pertinent to go deeper into his poetry to discover and rediscover his rare concern for social reformation and his patriotic zeal.

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