

Henry Vivian Derozio, A Revolutionary and a Patriot: A Study of his Selected Poems

Dr. Jyoti Syal, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities,
Maharishi Markandeshwar Deemed to be University, Mullana, Ambala.

Abstract

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio merits the place of a torch-bearer in the literary canon comprising of Indian poetry in English. He is one of those intellectuals who have their roots in the state of Bengal. One of his significant contributions which make him stand in the league of the haloed freedom fighters is his revolutionary fervour. Anyone who traces the trajectory of his abjectly short-lived corporal existence can be judiciously opinionated about Derozio's potential to have bloomed into an active patriot leading India's aspirations to be the master of its destiny in a world that had tasted a freeing of the human spirit through the lasting outcry of liberty, equality and fraternity emanating out of the French Revolution in 1789. Had destiny granted Derozio time to live for even three full decades, the revolutionary in him would have come to the fore as he died at the age of twenty two. This can be claimed on the strength of one's understanding of the brief span of five years that this teenager was granted to work and establish himself as a teacher, poet, journalist, ideologue and champion of women's rights. At the time of his demise, he had almost done with all the activities enumerated above and was feverishly turning into a revolutionary spirit. Derozio's revolutionary sensibility is deeply influenced by Romantic poets. The ideas and modes of expression may have been borrowed, to some extent, from the contemporary English poets but the sentiments and spirit are genuine. Derozio was a pioneer and related to Indian Renaissance which was the result of the impact of British rule, their exploitation and expansion of empire. It was the awakening of national consciousness of people with new light and new thought. This reawakening or Renaissance spread the seeds of patriotism for national interest. In creating this national interest or to awaken patriotism in the minds of people, poets and writers played a significant role. During this phase of Derozio's life when the Hindu society in Bengal was undergoing turmoil, Derozio wrote poems suffused with the spirit of nationalism and rationalism. Derozio had a burning passion for freedom and an intoxicating urge for liberation from all kinds of bondages. The present paper is an attempt to analyse Derozio with respect to two of his poems- *The Harp of India* and *Freedom to the Slave*.

Key Words: Nationalism, revolution, Renaissance, patriotism

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio as a poet and writer is revolutionary to the core and writes in a romantic vein to enjoy the free flights of fantasy. Derozio is credited to be a part of the Indian public memory the way thousands and thousands have been and will continue to be. Derozio merits the place of a torch-bearer in the literary canon comprising of Indian poetry in English. But the state of affairs in the arena of literary reputations in post-independence India remains such that in this land that boasts of a living and continuous literary tradition, not just through centuries but millennia, those who deserve to be the bedrock, remain mostly unknown and entirely unread. As and when a comprehensive enumeration of such figures and names is undertaken in an effort to resurrect them and restore their place of pride in the nation's consciousness, Derozio will be the leading light amongst such luminaries. While he is recognized primarily amongst those intellectuals who have their roots in the state of Bengal, one of his significant contributions having the potential of catapulting him in league of the haloed freedom fighters is his revolutionary fervour. Anyone who traces the trajectory of his abjectly short-lived corporal existence can be judiciously opinionated about Derozio's potential to have bloomed into an active patriot leading India's aspirations to be the master of its destiny in a world that had tasted a freeing of the human spirit through the lasting outcry of liberty, equality and fraternity emanating out of the French Revolution in 1789. Had destiny granted Derozio time to live for even three full decades, the revolutionary in him would have come to the fore as he died at the age of twenty two. This can be claimed on the strength of one's understanding of the brief span of five years that this teenager was granted to work and establish himself as a teacher, poet, journalist, ideologue and champion of women's rights. At the time of his demise, he had almost done with all the activities enumerated above and was feverishly turning into a revolutionary spirit.

Derozio was a pioneer and related to Indian Renaissance which was the result of the impact of British rule, their exploitation and expansion of empire. It was the awakening of national consciousness of people with new light and new thought. It was a kind of socio-cultural change which was the result of the union between two cultures—the east and the west. The light of Renaissance ignited nationalism and secularism in human minds, encouraged people to learn Western literature and philosophy for the rediscovery of the world with a new outlook, urged Indians to fight against all social malaise, inspired people to develop intellectual vision and to seek Truth, and above all, stirred them up to rediscover our cultural heritage and to understand the glory of our ancient civilization. This reawakening or Renaissance spread the seeds of patriotism for national interest. In creating this national interest or to awaken patriotism in the minds of people, poets and writers played a significant role. During this phase of Derozio's life when the

Hindu society in Bengal was undergoing turmoil, Derozio wrote poems suffused with the spirit of nationalism and rationalism.

Derozio had a burning passion for freedom and an intoxicating urge for liberation from all kinds of bondages. His poetic career spans a very short period of six years only. He is known more for his social and political contribution for the Young Bengal Movement. Deeply influenced by the French Revolution, Derozio addressed the intellectual group of Bengal and familiarized it with his own radical thinking. His philosophy of equality, liberty and fraternity was not against the tenets of either Hinduism or Christianity but he debunked Hindu idolatry.

Derozio's contribution for the eradication of *Suttee* custom is immense. He vehemently questioned existence of the pernicious custom which dogged Hindu religious practices. He also questioned orthodoxy and laid down the foundation stone of a modern Bengal. His contribution to Indian Writing in English as well as for the freedom of India is enormous. While familiarizing his students, he carried his message onwards and later became a renowned social reformer and thinker. There is no denying the fact that Derozio wrote many significant poems from the point of nationalism. There was an urgent need for social and religious reform at such a flux of time.

We find Derozio as a revolutionary like Raja Rammohan Roy related to the reform movement for the improvement of Hindu society, known as the Young Bengal Movement. He was the chief propounder who propelled his revolutionary activities as a Professor of the Hindu College in 1826, at the age of 17 and soon became very popular. He taught there till 1831. Derozio was deeply impressed by the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity which are the basic tenets of French Revolution. His passion for teaching and quest for new learning drew around him a group of bright students of the college. He instilled among his students ideas of thinking rationally and freely, to challenge authority, to adore liberty, equality and freedom and to love truth. He created a literary platform named 'Academic Association' for debates and discussions on literature, philosophy, history and science. He spread radical ideas for bringing about social change.

Derozio composed many poems under the revolutionary vein. In the present paper attempt has been made to analyse three of his poems named *Freedom to the Slave* (1827), *The Harp of India* (1827) and *To India- My Native Land* (1827) in which Derozio speaks of his notion of bringing change. In *The Harp of India*, which was published in March, 1827, Derozio feels sad about the deteriorated state into which his homeland has fallen. He is reminded of the rich cultural heritage and golden glory his country enjoyed in the ancient past. The poet refers to the rich art and tradition of Indian poetry as the 'harp of India'. The poet begins the poem with a rhetorical question as to why the glorious tradition of Indian poetry lies neglected like 'a broken harp hung

on a leafless bough'. The Anglo-Indian community, which, out of a sense of shame, tried to desperately cover up its matrilineal origin and made futile attempts to be English, to look up to England as its native country and lost in the bargain, belonging nowhere. Derozio recognizes India as his country and shows the concern for her condition even when most of the Indians were either not aware of their heritage or had not risen up to acknowledge the enslaved state of the country.

He considers it his foremost duty to help revive the country's golden past and make it regain its lost glory:

Why hang'st thou lonely on yon withered bough?

Unstrung, forever, must thou there remain

Thy music once was sweet—who hears it now?

Why doth the breeze sigh over thee in vain?—

Silence hath bound thee with her fatal chain;

Neglected, mute, and desolate art thou,

Like ruined monument on desert plain! — (Chaudhari 96-97)

The image of the harp highlights the grief of the poet. He seems to apostrophise the 'harp', a musical instrument compared to human happiness known for those happy days when it produced melodious sounds that flowed from it. But compared to those days, now it is neglected, lonely and no such sweet music is produced from it. The present state of the 'harp' addresses the sad, tattered and completely devastated condition beyond description which is actually the poet's personal state of life. So initially we are subjected to the deep-seated frustration embedded in the poet in the making of a revolutionary in him. He further deepens his anguish in the following expression:

How many an arm has o'er thee hung,

How many a hand thy notes has strung,

How many a voice to thee has sung—

And now thou'rt cast away! (22)

In the above stanza, the poet feels that his life has become a plaything in the hands of others. He feels like a musical instrument which was used by many people. 'The broken harp' relates to the artistic downfall of the poet's country, he feels it to be a personal loss but the horizon of his grief crosses personal boundaries. In this sad state of mind, the poet's condition can be compared to a bird whose wings are clipped and it desperately craves to enjoy the freedom of flying high in the sky. 'The pangs of slavery' are felt by the poet. In the next stanza, the poet addresses:

Yet, ruined harp, not thou alone

Neglect and cold contempt hast known;
 Thou heedest not the slights of those
 Who give thee undisturb'd repose.(22)

The 'ruined harp' is not suffering alone the destruction and decay, neglect and indifferent treatment. But the poet acquaints it for undergoing the same state of mind. He adds that the 'broken harp' was so rich once upon a time that it did not pay attention to such people who bore insults hurled upon them. It enjoyed such a state of sleep which could not be disturbed even a little bit. It remained busy in preserving its respect and went on to help her produce its own constructive and melodious songs of glory:

But there's a thing that feels disdain,
 That cannot brook the thought of pain,
 That bleeds to meet affliction's dart—
 That tender thing's a feeling heart! (22)

We find that the poem is full of patriotic fervour having a matured expression of the poet's love for his country. Here, the harp symbolizes nation itself as 'compared to the heartstrings' of the broken harp. (xxviii) Rosinka Chaudhuri also opines in this context about the poet's growth of mind as a fierce revolutionary:

Indicative of the distance travelled by Derozio in the two years between the publication of the first poem and the later sonnet, a comparison of the two poems shows us how a poem of a romantic nature has metamorphosed into a poem of nation. Addressed to a nation in the making, *The Harp of India*, significantly located on the first page of Derozio's first book of poems, is polemical in its appeal for the regeneration of a once glorious nation but constitutes, nonetheless, a culmination of the quest for poetic confidence that began with the first. (xxviii-xxix)

The poet pays a glorious tribute to the rich tradition of art of Indian poetry. The poet is deeply anguished at the downfall of the age-old Indian poetic heritage under the slavish shackles of British imperialism. Despite lesser Indian blood in the poet, his poetry breathes with very Indian themes and sentiments. He questions, whether the art of Indian poetry which was almost dead during the period of British domination of India, must remain in this state of passivity and coma forever, like an unstrung harp. The poet recollects that the state of Indian poetry was once rich and glorious like the sweet melodies of a harp. Now there is no one to hear that melody as the present times provide no inspiration to the creative minds and hearts to revive the tradition of soul-stirring poetic art. The breeze blows over the broken harp of poetry without drawing any melody from it.

The prevailing conditions of the times were such that they forced the poets and the poetic inspirations to keep mum and dumb as if under gag bound by the threatening and deadly chain. As fear gripped the artists, the art of poetry lay neglected, and abandoned like a ruined monument in the vast wilderness of deserts.

The Harp of India is the fruit of Derozio's maturity and he was at once hailed as a pioneer in the field of Indian poetry in English. One of the reviewers said that it is, certainly a great poem and could have been a major national song. Even as it is, it remains a magnificent tribute to India, and for those who are prepared to work for their pleasure for a poem to read and re-read. Another reviewer on the other hand, said succinctly that it is rather as if the wisdom of Sanskrit had been woven into form of the poem. The versification is utterly beautiful. No other words will do the same. In his poems, Derozio meditates upon the revolutionary power of the public and the youth. He himself was a revolutionary and wanted to destroy many things that were the result of man's evil nature. He is happy to see the mighty power of public movement which destroyed many empires in the past. The strangled independence of a country is just a toy in the presence of foreign rule. Even strong nations could be reduced to weaker ones when taken over by dominant nations. These foreign powers destroy the fabrics of cultural and political framework of the colony by targeting its economic base and are responsible for their complete devastation.

In his another poem *Freedom to the Slave*, he passionately declares in the opening of the poem, quoting Campbell, 'And as the slave departs, the man returns'. (105-106)

How felt he when he first was told
 A slave he ceased to be;
 How proudly beat his heart when first
 He knew that he was free!
 The noblest feelings of the soul
 To glow at once began;
 He knelt no more; his thoughts were raised;
 He felt himself a man. (105-106)

The basic theme of this poem is the jubilation and happiness that one experiences when he is freed from the shackles of captivity. Derozio has written this poem from the perspective of a slave who has recently been released from the bondage of slavery by his master. This poem also is an expression of his strong desire for freedom for his country, India. The poet thirsts to be free from the chains of race, blood and tongue. He longs to be able to come out of the chains that bind him and those that compartmentalize human beings into caste, creed, religion and

nationality. He aspires and dreams of the ultimate liberty of man and the supreme recognition of the person as a human being. Derozio's poetry reveals the poet's mood which swings from hope to despair, from liberty to suppression, from love to death. The poetry enables us to witness the spiritual struggle experienced by the poet who longed to achieve liberty, but courted subjugation both racial and colonial. Derozio's poetry has a style of touching on mirror image, corresponding aspects of a single theme. This yoking of contradictory features is indicative of the poet's own ambivalence and his own dialectic nature. His poems reveal the clash in his life between his ethnic background and patriotism for India, his pro-west attitude and his state of suppression and colonialism. The poet was very pained over the fact that India was under British rule and this deep anguish led to revolt. He laments this fact in the poem.

In his another poem, *To India- My Native Land*, published in 1828, the poet asserts:

My country! in thy days of glory past

A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,

And worshipped as a deity thou wast.

Where is that glory, where that reverence now? (173)

Here he again talks about the glorious past of India before colonisation, how India was revered and worshipped as a deity. At the same time he also laments the fact that 'glory' and 'reverence' is now no more. He laments the fact that India is under foreign rule and feels the need for India to awake and break all the shackles which impound him.

The poem is a typical Derozian poem in its theme and style. Here the poet looks forward to a radical change substituting the degradation and devaluation of India because of her slavery to the British. He desperately seeks India to regain her lost glory and reverence. The poet begins with a grief-stricken utterance, "My Country!"(173) that reverberates throughout the poem. With a heart brimming with sorrow, the poet grieves over the lamenting and nightmarish scenario of present India. India is trodden under the British feet. The profound patriotic fervour of the poet finds expression in this passionate address, "My Country! in thy days of glory past", (173) the poet's use of the figure of speech – apostrophe is rhetorical that addresses his country as a personified India in the incarnation of a Goddess. He further deepens his concern to regain his motherland's age-old glory:

Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last,

And groveling in the lowly dust art thou:

Thy minstrel hath no wreath to weave for thee

Save the sad story of thy misery! (173)

India is considered as a female figure since we always relate to our country as mother and refer to her as *Bharat Mata* (or Mother India). He elaborates further that India was full of glory in past times. It had a rich cultural, spiritual and literary legacy: she was full of glory and was admired and revered all over the world. India was regarded highly by all but now, because of her subjugation the yoke of foreign rule, she has lost all her glory and grandeur. Seeing a sense of personal loss in the downfall of his country, the poet addresses her by saying that in the olden days, she was worshipped like a deity. He wonders where that glory and splendour have disappeared and regrets expressing a sense of personal loss. His motherland has now been reduced to the position of a slave to the British Empire. The country has been humiliated and is ashamed of grovelling in the dust. There was time when the country soared like an eagle in the skies but now the wings of that great bird have been clipped and it is chained. The poet has no wreath of flowers to offer to the country instead; he will dig into the past. He would try to sing about some parts of that great history which is no longer available to the younger generation. The only reward the poet wants for his efforts, is that his country should have a kind wish for the author and the countrymen should love him.

In this poem, Derozio's main theme is grieving about the loss of past glory of India and how the country that used to be known as the 'Golden Eagle' had been chained and enslaved. He proposed to write in return hoping for a kind wish from the country and its people. The poem echoes a remarkable influence of Romantic and medieval poets with the use of "thou" and "thee" in the poem. The poet effectively used the image of a golden bird thus hinting at the past glory of India. Words like 'Halo', 'Deity', 'Worship' elevate the country to a great height and then words such as 'chained', 'groveling', 'Lowly dust' and 'wreath' bring out the contrast strongly. The misery and lament of the poet compels readers to join in his sorrow and his ardent desire for change. The poet's sense of duty towards his motherland surpasses all else:

Well—let me dive deep into the depths of time

And bring from out the ages that have rolled

A few small fragments of those wrecks sublime,

Which human eye may never more behold;

And let the guerdon of my labour be my fallen country!

One kind wish from thee! (173)

In such verses that ring with true patriotic zeal, Derozio comes out as a revolutionary poet and not an Anglo-Indian or a Eurasian poet. He wants to cross every limit and do something great and out of the way to liberate his country. Though he is a Eurasian by birth, Derozio identified himself with India. His poems on India and on freedom for the country reflect the oneness that he experienced with India, the oneness he felt with an entire generation subject to colonial subjugation. His short life was constantly dogged by the memory of his mixed ethnic background and the distress it caused him, surfaces unknowingly in most of the poems.

Thus we can say that in Derozio's poems, it can be found that they set a new trend of modern India as compared to other poets who were writing in traditional way. He even challenged the British colonial rule through his poems and told them to leave India. The British asserted that the Indians were very happy under their rule. Derozio affirmed through his argument by asking them to leave India and then see that the people of India were very unhappy under their rule. It was slavery imposed upon Indians that sparked the fire of revolt in young Derozio. The desire for freedom was so deep and intense in him that the flame continued to inspire students of Hindu College even after his death. His students later came to be known as Derozians and they sparked off the Young Bengal Movement. It was well before the struggle of 1857 as evident from the poetic works of Derozio that he laid foundation stone for the Freedom Movement of India.

Derozio's art through his poems depicts his talent which is yet to receive full recognition and appreciation. In his poems, Derozio meditates upon the revolutionary power of the public and the youth. He himself was a revolutionary and wanted to destroy many things that were the result of man's evil nature. He is happy to see the mighty power of public movement which destroyed many empires in the past. The strangulated independence of a country is just a toy in the presence of foreign rule. Even strong nations could be reduced to weaker ones when taken over by dominant nations. These foreign powers destroy the fabrics of cultural and political framework of the colony by targeting its economic base and are responsible for their complete devastation. Derozio's love for the country of his origin, especially her subjugation under imperial forces and his revolutionary spirit also place him in the ranks of Romantics. If he was inspired by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, it was because he regarded them as powerful instruments for the cause of French Revolution. His poetic genius seems to satisfy his desire to see change in everything. At the same time Derozio's hatred for evil and mean actions of British Empire is clearly brought out. He is happy as a poet but sad at the lost glory of a great civilization whose freedom is snatched by foreign rule with its people failing to unite for a common cause and fight

against evil forces of imperialism. Like the poet himself, the revolt breaks all barriers and this clarion call comes from his verses to cause national awakening.

REFERENCES

- Bhattacharya, P.C. “The Beginning-Henry Louis Vivian Derozio”. *Indo-Anglian Literature and the Works of Raja Rao*. Delhi: Atma Ram & Sons, 1983. Print.
- Bradley – Birt, Francis (ed.), *Poems of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, A Forgotten Anglo Indian Poet*. Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1980. Print.
- Chaudhuri, Rosinka. *Derozio, Poet of India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2008. Print.
- Dasgupta, Mary Ann (ed.). *Henry Louis Vivian Derozio: Anglo-Indian Patriot and Poet, A Memorial Volume*. Calcutta: Derozio Commemorative Committee, 1973. Print.
- Derozio, Henry Louis Vivian. *Poems*, Calcutta: Printed for the Author at the Baptist Mission Press; sold by Messrs. S. Smith and Co., Hurkaru Library, 1827. Print.
- Naik, M.K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982. Print.