

Henry Derozio and the Making of Indian Literature in English

Mukesh Williams

Though Indian writer Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) initiated the Bengal Renaissance, laid the foundation of Indian aesthetics in English, and initiated Indian writing in English, he has been largely ignored by literary critics and historians alike. Many literary historians see him only as an aberration or a disruptive force, more to be associated with either the half-caste Anglo-Indian community or the privileged English elite who had nothing to do with the making of India as a nation or the writing of Indian literature in English per se. In over one and a half century of neglect Derozio has been systematically removed from anthologies and textbooks of poetry all around India, except perhaps in Bengal where he is still remembered as a vibrant force who once shook the traditional Bengali Hindu society with his revolutionary ideas.

Shortly before and after independence, purist and nationalist constructions of Indian literature in English jettisoned Muslim, Christian and Anglo-Indian writers from the canon of Indian writing in English for one reason or the other. It has been argued that writers with a European background or ancestry could not understand the Indian ethos completely or even participate in the resistance movement against the British Empire. Usually, when such writers propounded

iconoclastic views they were seen as a threat to the tradition-bound Brahmin society that thrived on privilege of caste and religious ritual. Even in Bengal the popularity of Derozio rests more on his iconoclasm and less on his poetic achievements.

Most historians see Derozio as a young teacher in Bengal who introduced western rationalism, social experimentation and individual revolt amongst his students at the Hindu College and brought in the evils of meat-eating and excessive drinking. They feel that Derozio received a fitting end when he was thrown out of the College for his dissolute ways and died an untimely death after contracting cholera. Little did the college elders realize that after Derozio's resignation and departure from College his influence would grow. They did not anticipate that his disciples would come to be known as Derozians and would bring about a renaissance in Bengal that would transform Indian society forever.

Even when scholars recognize the contribution of Derozio in the modernizing of Indian education, they find it rather difficult to accept him as an Indian patriot and a writer who wrote fine verses extolling the virtues of India he loved and the tradition he cherished. His love songs, sonnets and longer poems, collected in his published works *Poems* (1827) and *The Fakeer of Jungheera, a Metrical Tale and Other Poems* (1828), demonstrate his ability as a first class poet who gave both focus and direction to Indian writing in English. In recent years Progressive Publishers from Calcutta have brought out the complete works of Derozio under the title *Song of the Stormy Petrel: Complete Works of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio* which brings together almost lost and extant works of the writer in a single volume.

Literary Categories

It would be worthwhile to distinguish between Anglo-Indian literature and Indian writing in English. Anglo-Indian literature was understood to be the “territorial literature of British India” written by Englishmen during or after their sojourn in India¹ Though this literature reflected the influence of both the English and Indian civilizations, it nonetheless had an overtly British bias, a bias towards the mother country. The literature was largely meant for the English reading public.

As the British Empire took roots in India, the English preferred to anglicize the newfound Indian colony rather than orientalize themselves, thereby displacing the Persian language of the Mogul courts with English as the medium of expression. With the introduction of English law and education in India it became incumbent on the part of the British to introduce English as the primary medium of expression in Indian courts of law and institutions of higher learning. Soon English displaced Persian and became the primary medium of communication amongst the educated classes in big cities.

It must be noted that not all Anglo-Indians shared the sentiments of Derozio about Indian society. Many adopted European dress and manners and looked down in disdain on everything Indian. Within the larger discourse of imagining the nation the Anglo-Indians were not welcome, though other minorities like the Muslims, Indian Christians, Jews and Sikhs were permitted. It was believed that Anglo-Indians were too entrenched in the British culture and possessed a somewhat condescending attitude towards the common Indians. Not only the nationalists but also a large number of liberals found it difficult to endorse the views and sentiments of Anglo-Indian writers. This erroneous belief has led to

the marginalization of Anglo-Indian writers like Derozio, Dom Moraes and Allan Sealy.

The importance of Calcutta city in the development of English language and subsequently Indian writing in English has not been investigated in detail. Calcutta was a premier city of British India and both the British and Anglo Indians inhabited the city creating an intellectual environment which later became a conduit for modern ideas. Till the latter half of the eighteenth century the Anglo-Indians, of Calcutta enjoyed the same privileges as those accorded to the Europeans. But from the late eighteenth century the British began to withhold these privileges to the Anglo-Indians. High-ranking positions in the military or civil services were no longer reserved for the Anglo-Indians. Their children were prevented from going abroad to pursue higher education. Ostracized at home and prevented from going abroad to study, they found themselves in a *cul de sac*.

Sensing a loss of good educational facilities, Anglo-Indians like John William Rickett and James Kyd developed parent-centered schools using the British public school as a model to design their own institutions. This was also a time when Anglo-Indians were deciding whether to forge an identity based on their Englishness or their Indianness.

Derozio, half Portuguese and half British, a Lusso-British, felt that he was typically Indian in thought and sentiment. He saw India as a motherland and argued that since he was born and bred in India he was in an unequivocal position to acknowledge India as his country. He, therefore, pledged to do his best in her service. He realized that the future of the Anglo-Indian community lay in assimilating with the Indian culture. He also felt that the Anglo-Indians should be more rooted in the Indian ethos in order to survive.

With the coming of the railways, postal and telegraph systems in the middle of the nineteenth century the Anglo-Indians once more entered the public sectors. By now the Anglo-Indians understood that their lot lay with the Indians and not with the British. Since most of the Anglo-Indians sympathized with the 1857 Mutiny, they were able to enter the military and para-military forces, customs and medical services.

In recent years due to a change in the literary climate of India and the growing confidence of Indian writers in English, many critics with progressive views have tried to reassess the contributions made by Derozio and his place in the literary canon of Indian writing in India. Derozio's writings are now seen as the basis of a moral aesthetics which has become a touchstone for subsequent writers writing in English. Novelists like Allan Sealy acknowledged Derozio as a predecessor, something rare in the literary annals of Indian writing in English. Not only have novelists and poets extolled the literary merits of Derozio but also literary critics like Vinay Dharwadker have devoted many pages to the literary contribution of Derozio and his subsequent effect on the literary aesthetics of Indian writing in English.

On a deeper level Derozio's works subvert the grand nationalist narrative of a pure Hindu identity, which elided the hybrid identities of Anglo-Indians and other communities in the making of Indian literature in English. By introducing a character by the name of Henry Luis Vivian Fonseca-Trotter, an indigo planter, in his novel *Trotternama* Sealy reactivates the entire controversy that surrounded the life of Derozio. The lightly disguised Derozio in the novel is thrown out of Hindu College, for drinking and beef-eating, something which could have happened to Sealy himself if he had emulated the unorthodox ways of his predecessor at St. Stephen's College where he was a student.

Tackling Social and National Issues

Derozio tackled important issues of his times such as burning of widows and improvement of India, though both these essays are irretrievably lost. He eloquently campaigned against sati and the suffering of widows and felt that western education would bring about a change in Indian society that would eradicate the twin evils. In his Notes on *The Fakeer of Jungheera* he wonders if the criminal act of burning Hindu widows is “injurious to society.”² He describes the evil of sati plaguing Indian society in unequivocal terms:

Satee is a spectacle of misery, exciting in the spectator a melancholy reflection upon the tyranny of superstition and priest-craft. The poor creatures who suffer from this inhuman rite, have but little notion of the heaven and the million years of uninterrupted happiness to which their spiritual guides tell them to look forward. The choice of immediate death, or a protracted existence, where to be—only must content their desire, is all that is offered to them; and who under such circumstances, would hesitate about the preference?³

The passionate but ironical comment on the blind belief and bigotry in Indian society highlighted Derozio’s Indianness and concern for society. He went on to add that a Bengali Hindu widow’s life was rather “degrading and humiliating” as she had to do menial household work without being allowed to eat enough food. She had to sleep on the floor and “suffer indignities from the youngest members of her family.”⁴ Convinced that the problem of suttee and the living conditions of widows in Hindu society must be changed, Derozio campaigned for the abolition of suttee and ameliorative change in the status of Hindu widows. He was convinced that the solution to all the ills plaguing Indian society of the

nineteenth century was a good modern education.

Derozio was quite disturbed by the poor quality of education imparted by the schools of Calcutta in the nineteenth century. But he felt that though Indian education was in a “backward state” local communities including the East Indian community were not unduly concerned. Most members of the East Indian community were interested in their own welfare and not in the welfare of society at large. Derozio complained that there was no “unanimity” amongst its members as most of them were “anxious for their weal.”⁵ Derozio was nonplussed at their callousness and lack of concern for the pitiable state of Indian education. He admitted that though there were two good academic institutions, such as the Calcutta Grammar School and the Parental Academic Institute, they were not enough. With just two institutes in Calcutta it was impossible to exhort the East Indians to stop sending their children to study in England.

Though Derozio was of European stock, he always maintained that he was an Indian in thought and sentiment: “I was born in India and have been bred here. I am proud to acknowledge my country, and to do my best in her service, but even love of country shall not hinder me from expressing what I believe to be right.”⁶ The sentiment that Derozio expressed on August 3, 1826 in the *India Gazette* under the title “Education in India” was not untoward. Children of mixed parentage were looked down upon by the British and the Indians alike. Their plight was rather pitiable. Though most Eurasians felt that their lot lay with the British, Derozio realized that this social identification would not lead them far. If the Eurasians had to survive they had to seek their fortunes as Indians and in India.

With this thought in mind he wrote his essay on the merits and demerits of

British colonization in *The Kaleidoscope* on September 2, 1829. In this essay he argued that the unequal treatment of Indian natives and Indo-Britons would prove rather detrimental to the enlightenment ideals of Europe and British colonization in particular. Derozio concluded that,

Upon the whole then, we must draw the inference, that colonization would not be beneficial unless the British Legislature interferes, and materially alters the present system of Indian policy, by admitting natives and Indo-Britons to a participation of privileges, on a similar footing, as far as practicable and expedient, with the Europeans. It is only by such a measure that discontent can be prevented from brooding into rebellion, and the arts and sciences, when established, can produce benefits both to the governors and governed, to Britain, and to this, at present, our oppressed and neglected native country. The basis of good government is, as Jeremy Bentham observes, 'the greatest good of the greatest number', and I heartily hope that this principle the wisdom of the legislature will see fit, ere many years elapse, to adopt in every measure connected with India.⁷

Colonization, the way it was structured, was never a sustainable doctrine. Derozio understood that the unequal treatment meted out to Indians by the British would result in discontent and rebellion. Subsequent events in the twentieth century would prove the correctness of his views. It is important to note Derozio's succinct and clear style that possessed a Byronic quality tinged with metaphysical wit gave a passionate intensity to his ideas.

Influence of Derozio

Derozio lived for just over twenty-two years and during this time he intellectually

energized Calcutta and spearheaded the Bengal renaissance that would have lasting effects on Indian thought and sentiment in the coming centuries. His standing as a poet has undergone considerable transformation in nearly two hundred years. His early biographers, Thomas Edwards and E. W. Madge called him a Eurasian poet, his poetry editors like Bradley-Birt identified him as an Anglo-Indian poet, and subsequent researchers like S. K. Chakraborty saw him an Indo-Anglican poet. Modern historians like R. K. Dasgupta see Derozio as a Bengali poet who wrote in English. Recently Arvind Krishna Mehrotra referred to Derozio as a “literary forbear” who has been acknowledged and cross-referenced by modern Indian writers in English like Allan Sealy and Salman Rushdie.⁸

The influence of Derozio on young Bengalis was tremendous. They were awakened by his free thinking and rationalist ideas. They began to see the narrow sectarianism of Bengali society. Often they took their revolt to extremes frightening the tradition-bound society which reacted by ostracizing them and their teacher. At a time when Raja Rammohan Roy was talking about reforming the antiquated notions of Bengali Hindu society, Derozio had already initiated a revolution in ideas. He gave Bengal a modern consciousness that soon became a part of the national consciousness, culminating in the freedom struggle of the next century,

Derozio’s grounding in rationalist thought was made possible by his teacher David Drummond who introduced the young boy to a whole range of western renaissance knowledge. During the period between 1815 and 1925 Drummond introduced Derozio to the works of Emmanuel Kant, David Hume, Francis Bacon and others and transformed his inquisitive pupil into an erudite scholar. When Derozio was only seventeen years old he was appointed a teacher at Hindu

College later known as the Presidency College. Hindu College was the first English seminary in Bengal which imparted European learning by teaching English, History and Geography.

Derozio started a study group and a debating society which met at his house. Not only were his students present at such meetings but intellectuals such as the Chief Justice of the Calcutta Supreme Court and missionaries like Alexander Duff (1806-1875) who joined occasionally.⁹ Later the group shifted to Manicktala and came to be known as the Academic Association.

Discussions in English were becoming important, as English was becoming “the language of the ruling power” and its knowledge was “necessary for government service,” and commerce.¹⁰ During these gatherings members discussed a host of European historians, poets and philosophers such as Robertson, Edward Gibbon, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, Isaac Newton, Davy, Hume, Thomas Paine, Locke, Reid, Stewart Brown, Byron Walter Scott and Robert Burns.

The spirit of inquiry was not completely welcomed by many of the parents whose sons participated in these discussions. Word soon spread that Derozio was advocating unorthodox and nihilistic ideas such as agnosticism, disobedience to parents and incestuous matrimonial alliances. When H. H. Wilson asked him about his opinion on the three issues mentioned above Derozio wrote back that he had never “denied the existence of a god,” that he always rebuked his students for misbehaving with their parents, and had never advocated marriage between brother and sister. Derozio concluded his letter by emphasizing the fact that he was helping his students to “think for themselves” and not accept anything blindly.¹¹

Moral Aesthetics

Derozio wrote on the influence of poetry on society in the *India Gazette* dated January 22, 1830. The essay has become an aesthetic manifesto, a standard for future aesthetics of Indian writing in English. In the essay he argued that the influence of poetry on society is tremendous and therefore it was the responsibility of the poet to elevate and improve “man’s moral and intellectual nature.”¹² Derozio felt that much of English poetry written by Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, Burns, Byron, Shelley, Wordsworth and Campbell tended to be despondent when life itself was “invested” with “buoyancy and elasticity.”¹³ Most of English poetry up to now has flowed through “poisonous channels,” he wrote. It was time that it opened new springs and engaged the mind in “voyages” of “discovery and “happiness.”

Poetry as it was conceived and written needed a “radical reform” which must allow it to shift from unhappiness and despondency to hope and discovery.” He continued,

Let the poet abandon war, misanthropy, romances and false feeling and let his enthusiasm be on that side which espouses man’s best interest; let it be his object to improve, while he delight, and to promote the advancement of society, while he scatters flowers along its path; and he may rest assured that fame will not only await his steps but that he will attain a high rank among the best benefactors of mankind. Hearts that are now dead to the duties which they owe to society will spring, starting at his call, and sympathizing with the world while they take a more active and just part in its concerns will melt.¹⁴

Derozio charged poets with the duty of improving society and promoting its advancement. His aesthetics had a moral purpose. He felt that poetry must improve individuals by instilling in them feelings of love and duty towards others.

A lot of his poems might sound immature hedonistic but we must remember that Derozio was quite young and did not have a literary tradition to guide him. Though his “Ode From the Persian of Hafiz” has an epicurean slant it is also tempered with love and duty: Derozio writes,

I have felt love's fatal pain
Such—I cannot tell again
Absence poisons every bliss
Such as—ask not what it is.

I have roamed the world around,
And at last a treasure found,
One without, or blight or blame,
One whom—ask me not to name.¹⁵

Having felt the sense of loss, the poet transcends physical love into a love of the divine—“One without, or blight or blame.”

His love for others was an abiding quality of his poetry. Just before his death he wrote a poem to his pupils in which he stands above them as a gentle presence guiding them and helping them unfold their potential:

Expanding, like the petals of young flowers,

I watch the gentle opening of your infant minds,
And the sweet loosening of the spell that binds
Your intellectual energies and powers,
That stretch, like young birds in soft summer hours,
Their wings, to try their strength. O! how the winds
Of circumstances, and gentle April showers
Of early knowledge, and unnumbered kinds
Of new perceptions, shed their influence:
And how you worship truth's omnipotence!
What gladness rains upon me, when I see
Fame in the mirror of futurity,
Weaving the chaplets you are doomed to gain—
And then I feel I have not lived in vain.¹⁶

This is the poem of a teenager, without formal schooling, but it carries within it the complex maturity of thought and feeling of an adult. In the poem the poet nurtures the “infant minds” by gently persuading them to see things in a new way—develop “new perceptions—”and helps them to realize their “intellectual energies and powers.” The poet feels that only when these “young birds” can fly freely in the skies of reason and truth, his mission will be complete—“And then I feel I have not lived in vain.”

At times his love for others turns to indignation when he sees injustice in society especially the ill-treatment meted out to Hindu widows and the detestable practice of sati. In the long poem *The Fakeer of Junghgeera* the beautiful Brahmin widow, Nuleeni, falls in love with the fakir of Junghgeera who lives in a fantasy world of an inaccessible rock cave. But the cruel hands of a bigoted society overpower them both in the form of her father-in-law. The tragic end

where Nuleeni embraces the burnt out eloquence of the fakir may be reminiscent of the English Romantics, but in the early nineteenth century this kind of work was never attempted by any writer. In fact Derozio did live to see the abolition of sati when in 1829 Lord William Bentinck declared it illegal.

Interestingly the 1828 edition of *The Fakeer of Jungheera* published by Samuel Smith and Co., had a poem about India written by Derozio. In the poem Derozio laments the lost glories of his “fallen country” in the following manner:

My country! In thy day 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?
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!—
Well—let me dive 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 for thee!¹⁷

Derozio delves into the past to recreate the glory of a nation now “groveling in the lowly dust” and implicitly wishes the “beauteous halo” and godliness to return. In the fervor of creating a nation, Derozio not only anticipates Tagore but

also other writers like Sarojini Naidu and Bishnu Dey.

In another poem, “The Harp of India,” Derozio talks about the rich literary tradition of India withering on a “bough.”

Why hangs't thou lonely on yon withered bough?
Unstrung, for ever, 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:--
O! many a hand more worthy far than mine
Once thy harmonious chords to sweetness gave
And many a wreath for them did Fame entwine
Those hands are cold—but if thy notes divine
May be by mortal wakened once again,
Harp of my country, let me strike the strain.

The poet yearns to create some divine music by playing on the harp so that he could free the soul of India. We must remember that in 1827 there was no sign of freedom struggle, no nationalist fervor that Derozio could have tapped. His was an original voice of revolt to free the nation of its shackles even before it could grip the soul of the nation.

Derozio's works, both his prose and poetry, revealed his deep-seated concern for society. He functioned both as a prophet and a seer who wanted India to grow

and change. At heart he was an Indian with an intrinsically Indian sensibility that both writers and critics have begun to acknowledge.

NOTES

- 1 A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller eds., *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, Volume 14, The Victorian Age, Part Two, p. 1.
- 2 Dr. Abirlal Mukhopadhyay, Sri Amar Dutta, et. al., *Song of the Stormy Petrel: Complete Works of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio*, (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2001), Sakti Sadhan Mukhopadyay, "About the Collection," p. xxii.
- 3 Ibid., p. 316
- 4 Ibid., p. 316.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 304-5.
- 6 Ibid., p. 306.
- 7 Ibid., p. 319.
- 8 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, "Introduction," in *An Introduction of Indian Literature in English*, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ed., (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), pp. 25-26. Mehrotra writes, "Sealy's tribute to Derozio, a tribute from one Anglo-Indian writer to another from one 'Indo-Anglian' to his literary forbear, is exceptional" (p. 25).
- 9 Alexander Duff, 2nd Edition, *India and Indian Missions*, (Edinburgh: 1840), pp. 530-33.. Duff, a Scottish Christian missionary, came to Calcutta in 1830 and helped found the General Assembly's Institution in Calcutta (now known as the Scottish Church College) and also helped established the University of Calcutta He felt that the Hindu elite could be influenced by English culture and religion if they were instructed in the English language. He felt that the English language was the key to the understanding of western knowledge He wrote a pamphlet called A new Era of the English Language and Literature in India where he wanted the British to make the natives understand European Science and literature. Duff was also responsible for co-founding the *Calcutta Review* and was its editor from 1845-49.
- 10 D. H. Emmott, *Alexander Duff and the Foudation of Modern Education in India*, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (May 1965). Duff's English school became quite popular. "The school was an immediate success. From five boys on the first day the numbers rose to over 200 four days later. It was the desire for a knowledge of English among the middle and upper classes of Calcutta Hindus which causes the instant demand for admission to Duff's school was the language of the ruling power, knowledge of it was necessary for government service. English was also becoming the language of commerce. English was the gateway to the knowledge and science of the west" (p. 162).
- 11 Ibid., Derzio's Letter to Wilson, pp. 335-38.
- 12 Ibid., p. 320.
- 13 Ibid., p. 321.

13 Ibid., p. 321.

14 Ibid., p. 322.

15 Ibid., p. 240.

16 Ibid., p. 245.

17 Ibid., p. 99.

19 Ibid., "The Harp of India", March 1827, p. 11.