



A Blend of Imagination and Spontaneity in selected works of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio

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Abstract: Henry Louis Vivian Derozio occupies a significant position in early Indian English literature as a poet who harmonized Romantic imagination with intellectual spontaneity. Influenced by English Romantic poets yet deeply rooted in the socio-cultural realities of nineteenth-century India, Derozio's poetry reflects a unique blend of creative vision and emotional immediacy. This paper examines selected works such as *To India – My Native Land*, *The Harp of India*, and *The Fakir of Jungheera* to explore how imagination and spontaneity function as defining elements of his poetic expression. His imaginative reconstruction of India's glorious past, combined with his impassioned and spontaneous patriotic voice, reveals both aesthetic sensitivity and reformist zeal. The study argues that Derozio's poetry not only embodies Romantic ideals such as freedom, emotion, and individuality but also anticipates the emergence of national consciousness in Indian writing in English. Through lyrical intensity and unrestrained expression, Derozio transforms poetic imagination into a vehicle for social awakening and cultural introspection.

Keywords: Romantic imagination, spontaneity, early Indian English poetry, nationalism, reformist zeal, emotional intensity, cultural consciousness.

Scanning through the large canvas of Indo-Anglian literature in general, and poetry in particular, one wonders about some of the poets of the then era- who showed multifarious dynamism in their works, yet however forgotten and neglected. The name which flashes across my mind is none other than the 'brilliant and pathetic figure' 'of the boy-poet- Henry Louis Vivian Derozio' whose works present vivid imagination full of spontaneity. In his introduction Poems of H. L. V. Derozio A forgotten Anglo-Indian poet, F. B. Bradley-Birt rightly observes-

“.... His brief career, so full of effort and enthusiasm, flashes like an inspiration across the dull grey story of his unhappy fellow-countrymen..... To all with whom he came in contact he made the same magnetic appeal. Beneath the impulsiveness and vivacity and enjoyment of the boy there lay the depth and strength and broad-mindedness of the man, and it was this happy combination of the grave and gay, of the spontaneity of youth and the wisdom of age, that constituted something of the secret of his wonderful charm.”



Born of Portuguese parentage- his father, was a Portuguese and mother an Anglo-Indian-Derozio, thus was Eurasian. By and large all Eurasians during the colonial period were Anglophiles. This applied to the Derozio family also. However, Henry L. V. Derio turned out to be a renegade. It is indeed praiseworthy that Derozio accepted as his motherland and became a true son of the soil not only through his marvelous works but also in his deeds. This was not to be accepted or treasured by the British; their sole outlook towards the Anglos was demeaning. Hence, despite his devotion and patriotic fervor, comradeship with colleagues and his students of the Hindu college Calcutta, he remained a suspect in the eyes of the British or the administration of the college.

Prying deeply into Derozio's life one is happy and equally surprised to know that he spent a few years in Bhagalpur (Tarapur) district. Here he helped his uncle in an Indigo factory. It was here that the country scenery- the mountain, the ripple of the river Ganges and the varied beauty of nature appealed him strongly and the 'emotions recollected in tranquility began to weave new and aesthetic songs from his pen'. F. B. Bradley -Birt observes-

".....The months he spent there, however were destined to be momentous import in his career. The solitude gave him time thoroughly to grasp and assimilate all that he had so rapidly learned, and opportunity for deep serious thought. Gradually as he grew to see things with greater clearness, there came to him the revelation of his own exceptional gifts..... The peaceful life of the up-country station made strong appeal to the town bred boy. The common daily round of life as it had gone on in its changeless monotony for centuries was a new glimpse of human nature at its source to the youth who had been absorbed hitherto in his books. How vividly the smallest scenes and incidents appealed to him, the flood of poetry that from now onwards poured from his pen amply reveals. Here he was in touch with nature as he had never been before, and with nothing to distract his thoughts, he could watch with absorbing interest the whole ceaseless round of life in the changeless passing of the seasons- the ploughman urging his slow moving bullocks through the rich, upturned soil; the sower going forth to sow, and the reaper gathering in his harvest, the happy nut brown children, naked and unashamed, playing lazily in the dust and the sun, the housewife cooking her evening meal against her lord's return or wending her way up from the river bank, her water-pot, filled to the brim, gracefully poised upon her head, her averted beneath the close-drawn veil; the sound of singing at the marriage feasts and the wailing of the women at the burning ghat- all these to the eager minded boy were of abiding interest. To his poetic instincts they made instant appeal.... It was small wonder that the gigantic rock rising out of the midst of the river Ganges and towering over the low-



lying alluvial plains with its air of mystery and romance impressed itself upon the boy's quick imaginations."

Thomas Edwards remarks-

"It was here at Bhagalpur, with the ripple of the Ganges in his ear, and the boats of the fisher and the trader borne on the tide, out of whose broad bosom rose the Fakir-inhabited rock of Jungheera, that the youthful poet drank in all those sweet influences of nature and much of human nature which indelibly impressed themselves on his intellect and imagination, and stirred him to the production of his most sustained effort in poetry, The Fakir of Jungheera."

The rock of Jungheera commonly called Ajgaivinath, stands in the middle of river Ganges near Sultanganj in Bhagalpur district. There are various temples on this rock but the famous one is that of the Lord Shiva. As the mythology states, King Bhagiratha while bringing the Ganges from down to earth, Janu was performing an oblation on this rock. So Janu gulped the whole water of the Ganges fearing an interruption in his oblation. Later, he ejected the Ganges from his ear. Derozio admits that the rock struck him as a place which could relate to achievements in love and war. He had indeed heard about the Fakeer and his imagination along with the scenic beauty weaved a wonderful tale. One of the important critics on Derozio, E. W. Madge suggests that it was amid the country scenery, with the ripple of the river Ganges in his ears and the music in his heart that the boy poet began to weave his wreath of song. It was as a matter of fact here at Sultanganj that the poet became fully conscious of "what it is to love and be loved".

Having said so much about the rock of Jungheera, it becomes pertinent to understand in brief varied beautiful aspects of the poem, The Fakeer of Jhungheera. It is no doubt one of the greatest Indian English ballads published in 1828, when Derozio was only 19 years old. The backdrop story of the poem relating to the pathetic custom of Sati Pratha in the pre-independent period is no doubt, a unique piece of work capturing the Indian essence of rites and rituals and religious boundaries. However, one feels sad and surprised as well that there is no mention of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio in any of the anti-suttee papers of Rammohun Roy and William Bentick. Perhaps they also like the English could not imagine a native, or an Anglo-Indian native with English as mother tongue to write anything other than brief reports and mercy petitions in faulty English.

The Fakeer of Jhungeera is a long poem written around 1824 and 1825. The miserable story is elaborated in about 2080 lines. Nuleeni, a young widow belonging to a high caste (brahmin), is forced to perform the rite of a suttee. Though reluctant, she proceeds to the funeral pyre only to be retrieved by her former Muslim lover, the Fakeer, a young chief of a band of bandits. She is pleased to requite his love and accompanies him to his stronghold, the rock of Jungheera. This breach of religious ceremony not only causes a disquiet among her relatives but also casts a slur on the social prestige of her father. He resolves to reclaim her by seeking vengeance upon the Fakeer. He goes on to plead for military assistance with Shuja the Prince of the Rajmahal. The prince gives more than thousands of his soldiers to fight. The moment the bandit chief finally goes forward to entice his band into marauding prior to quitting the lawless life, he comes up against these, and a battle begins. The result is that he is killed.



Nuleeni who finds her lover killed and dead is frantic with grief. She holds his corpse in arms and closely embraces her beloved and finally meets her end.

The poem begins with a strong and beautiful description of nature. In the image of young spirits in flights, the invisible winds wander at times over the flower bells, scattering fragrance while at other times stealing through the grass, producing rustle, breathes a mild sigh like a lover. The sun-lit stream breaks into dimples, of heavenly hopes into earthly creature just as a sleeping child wakes, smiling cheerily onto its mother. The description of sun is superb with use of exquisite images 'infinite flood of light', 'a golden urn', 'blessings fast on earth', beauties brightly forth'. The spontaneity in the poetry of Derozio is indeed very remarkable and worth mentioning-

“From field to field the butterfly
Flits- a bright creature of the sky;
As if an angel plucked a flower
From fairest heaven's immortal bower-”

The poet further describes the bee as giddy, enamoured of gathering nectar from the flowers, roams from shrub to shrub 'on quivering wing of melody'. The shade of the banyan tree, admired as chequered by the poet is so wonderfully drawn-

O! there beneath the chequered shade
By the wide-spreading Banyan made,
How sweetly wove might be the theme
Of gifted bard's delicious dream!
His temples fanned by freshening air,
His brain by fancies circled fair,
His heart on pleasure's bosom laid,
His thoughts in robes of song arrayed-
How blest such beauteous spot would be
Unto the soul of minstrelsy!”

Besides, the choruses of women, Brahmins and the chief brahmins presented in the poem were the folk- song sung by Indian country women during the funeral processions and self-immolation of widows. They simply echo the Vedic Mantras –

Scatter, scatter flowers around
Let the tinkling cymbal sound;
Strew the scented orient spice,
Prelude to the sacrifice;
Bring the balm, and bring the myrrh
Sweet, as is the breath of her
Who upon the funeral pyre
Shall, ere Surya sets, expire.

Such spontaneity and wisdom remind us of the romantic style of poetry of Byron, Shelley and Keats.

The worship of the sun God has been carried throughout the ages by varied sections of the society. One comes across the description of the supreme beauty and the power of the sun



in the Vedas and the Rig Vedas. It is indeed praise-worthy that although a Christian, Derozio's poems show a true Indian spirit and make us realize that he was definitely influenced by the Vedas, particularly the Rig Veda. He himself emphatically remarks-

“The Vedas which are supposed to contain the essence of wisdom, declare in various places wherever the language of praise is employed, that the object of such praise is the Deity or Brihm. Thus, fire is Brihm, the sun is Brihm, water is Brihm; and a number of other substances are glorified in like manner.”

The true Indian spirit is reflected beautifully in the following lines when the poet offers obeisance to the Sun God-

Surya with flaming locks, clear sighted god of day,
Thy seven matres bear on thy rushing car.
With these thy self-yoked steeds seen daughters of thy chariot
Onward thou dost advance. To thy refulgent orb
Beyond this lower gloom, and upward to the light
Would we ascend, O Sun!thou god among gods

All prayers in the ceremony of female immolation were addressed to the sun –

“Behold the rays of dawn, like heralds, lead on high
The sun that men may see the great all- knowing god
The stars slink off like thieves, in company with Night,
Before the all-seeing eye, whose beams reveal his presence,
Gleaming like brilliant flames, to nation after nation.”

The imaginative power and immense spontaneity run throughout the poem expressing in simple language the emotions on the theme of love and death of the lovers belonging to different classes. But what makes the poem unique is not the romantic element in the tale but as C. Paul Verghese puts it- “Derozio's ardor for social reform shows itself in this poem which tells the story of Brahmin widow who escapes the sati ritual by being carried away by a robber chief, only to become a widow again.”

Derozio's splendid use of Hindu and Islamic imagery of transience juxtaposed against the Christian image of an eternal soul highlighting the syncretistic aspect of the poet's imagination. In Canto I, stanza XVII, the poet anticipates the tragic end of the two lovers and weaves images of angles, immortal boundless love reminding us of Christian immortality-

“And this good angles weave for me,
The wreath of immortality!”

The description of both Nuleeni and the fakeer is notable. Let us observe how the poet uses beautiful images while describing Nuleeni-

With upward gaze, and white clasped hands,



She like a heaven- wrought statue, stands
'Tis thus that woman fair should be
Worshipped as a divinity:
Just when her beauty beams so bright,
As too intense for human sight:
Just in that hour when all her worth
Is fitted more for heaven than earth!

-and the fakeer's description-

His dusky brow, his raven hair,
His limbs of strength, his martial air,
His eye though softened into love
Far from the wilderness of dove,
His baldric round his manly waist,
His sabre hung, his pistols braced,
Bespeak him sure some bloody man-
The chieftain of a robber clan.
But whence came he? - 'Tis certain here
A sainted soul, a meek Fakeer,
On whom religion's sacred ray
Shines bright, hath dwelt for many a day, -

-such intense yet simple descriptions are perhaps nowhere present in the entire history of Indian writings. It is indeed unfortunate that today even after two hundred years, Derozio's vibrant and powerful poetry has not had the rightful acclaim of recognition and seems to have met a sad end like the poet himself – too short a span of life.

Placed in the historical perspective against the backdrop of the tyrannical Sati Pratha and the Bengal Renaissance, The Fakeer of Jungheera is no less nationalistic a work, rich in local colours, imagery and spontaneity. But all this swept aside and the one feature highlighted is that of Byronic echo. A close study of the poems unfolds that far from being modelled on Byron's ballads like *The Corsair*, or *The Siege of Corinth* or *The Prisoner of Chillon*, it is no doubt completely Indian in conception. Though the wild and weird character of the fakeer has some resemblance to Byronic figures however he is deeply rooted in the Indian soil. The poet's own note to the poem admits-

“A student of that excellent institution, the Hindu College, once brought me a translation of *Betal Puncheesee*, and the following fragment of a tale having struck me for its wilderness, I thought of writing a ballad, the subject of which should be strictly Indian.”

A brief glance at some of the sonnets of Derozio attributing to the spirit of renaissance is worth mentioning. Derozio although an Anglo-Indian was truly Indian in spirit; a radical thinker as observed by Md. Selim Akhtar 'one of the first Indian educators to disseminate western learning and science among the young men of Bengal'. During that time, 'the Hindu society in Bengal was undergoing a considerable turmoil'. The establishment of Brahma Samaj in 1828 created an adverse reaction within the orthodox Hindu society. It was at Hindu college



as headmaster that Derozio helped realize ‘the ideas for social change already in the air’. Within a very short time, (hardly Eighteen) he drew around him a group of intelligent boys in college constantly encouraging them to think freely and not accept anything blindly. He gave his pupils the message of the European enlightenment and watched the ‘gentle opening of their minds’ ‘expanding like the petals of young flowers’ – the makers of modern Bengal and of our 19th century Renaissance.

There is no doubt that the best of Derozio is found in his sonnets. Derozio’s great biographer Thomas Edwards is of the opinion that his sonnets ‘are all productions of great merit’. They show a delicacy of touch, an intensity of feeling, full of charm. His sonnets display a patriotic and nationalistic zeal which proved to be an awakening spirit among the youth of that period. In his book titled *A History of Indian English Literature*, M. K. Naik remarks- “A noteworthy feature of Derozio’s poetry is its burning nationalistic zeal. Poems like *To India – My Native land*, *The Harp of India* and *To the Pupils of the Hindoo College* have an unmistakable authenticity of patriotic utterance which stamps Derozio as a poet who is truly a son of the soil”. To the pupils of the Hindoo College is a testimony of his sincere devotion and boundless affection towards his students. Let us look at the unique beauty and the simplicity of the sonnet-

“Expanding like the petals of young flowers,
I watch the gentle opening of your minds,
And the sweet loosening of the spell that binds
Your intellectual energies and powes,
That stretch (like young birds in soft summer hours)
Their wings, to try their strength, O, how the winds,
Of circumstances, and freshening April showers
Of early knowledge, and unnumbered kinds
Of new perceptions shed their influence:
And how you worship truth’s omnipotence,
What joyance rains upon me, when I see
Fame in the mirror of futurity,
Weaving the chaplets you have yet to gain,
Ah then I feel I have not lived in vain.”

The *Harp of India* and *To India – My Native land* have indeed won highest literary acclaim. They have made an important landmark in the history of patriotic poetry and have no parallel in the entire history of Indian English literature. Referring to the latter, Dr. Dasgupta says- “Of his reverence for the ancient Indian civilization of which he thought himself to be a proud inheritor the finest expression is a sonnet (*To India- my Native Land*) which is the first poetic expression of our new patriotism”:

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?

The poet is deeply saddened to find the past glory vanished. This sonnet becomes significant in the history of Indian patriotism as it is more than a paean of our ancient glory: the pledge taken by the poet in the concluding couplet-



And let the guerdon of my labour be
My fallen country! one kind wish from thee!

It should be mentioned that Derozio's background - an Anglo-Indian torn between two cultures and struggling throughout his life for his own identity- the very title of the sonnet becomes highly striking. He does not stop at calling 'To India' only, but goes on to add 'My Native Land'

Again, in *The Harp of India*, the poet laments the vanished glory of his motherland comparing her with an unused harp hanging lonely 'on withered bough'. He boldly emphasises upon the fact that India was once upon a time in full vigour of life, which however is lost at that time. This is best expressed in the following lines-

Thy music once was sweet- who hears it now?

Moreover, the harp which has seen better days is bound in chains of silence. Derozio refers in fact to India's bondage to the west. The sad state of India is reflected strongly in the expressions like 'neglected', 'mute' and 'desolate'. India's culture, her rich heritage, and golden civilization is like a ruined monument on desert plain- the same emotional string envelops the other sonnet *To India My Native Land* where she is compared with a bird-

'The eagle pinion is chained down at last
And grovelling in the lowly dust thou art
And minstrel hath no wreath to weave for thee
Save the sad story of thy misery!'

Despite the melancholic note running through the poem, one is full of admiration for the young poet who is still optimistic about the harmonious chords of unused harp. Derozio is confident and wishes that the younger poets or singers should strike the sweet melodies of the harp.

The paper explores only a fragment of Derozio's works, having not touched his other poems and prose pieces. However, there is no doubt that in the annals of history of Indian writings, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio holds a very significant place becoming a torch-bearer of Indo Anglian literature. His strong deep rooted nationalistic and patriotic feelings embossed with intense imagery and spontaneity paved a long way in the freedom struggle movement, not to forget the 1857 revolt. If Raja Ram Mohan Roy is acknowledged as the leading revolutionary of the national movement against the Sati Pratha, Derozio holds an equal position in the movement through his powerful expression. I would like to conclude with one of his best sonnets written in praise of poetry -

Sweet madness! - when the youthful brain is seized
With that delicious phrenzy which it loves,
It raving reels, to very rapture pleased, -
And then through all creation wildly roves:
Now in deep recesses of the sea,
And now to the highest Himalay it mounts;
Now by the fragrant shores of Araby,
Or classic Greece, sweet Italia's founts,
Or though her wilderness of ruins; - now
Gazing on beauty's lip, or valour's brow;
Or rivalling the nightingale and dove



In pouring forth its melody of love;
Or giving to the gale, in strains of fire,
Immortal harpings- like a seraph's lyre.

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