

Patriotism and Nationalism in the Social Context of the Pre-natal Stage of the Independence: A Study of Selected Poems of Derozio

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Abstract

To understand the motives of the nineteenth century Bengali literature we must know the socio-political changes of the Bengal in the late 18th century by the British East India Company. It was a unique blend of religious and social reformers, scholars, literary giants, journalists, patriotic orators and scientists, all merging to form the image of a renaissance, and marked the transition from the 'medieval' to the 'modern'. The light of renaissance ignited nationalism and secular humanism in human minds, encouraged people to learn Western literature and philosophy for the rediscovery the world with new outlook, urged Indians to fight against all social diseases, inspired us to develop intellectual vision and to seek Truth, and above all, stirred up us to rediscover our cultural heritage, cultural treasures and to understand the glory of our ancient civilization. If we understand Derozio and his poems, we can understand that there is reflection of patriotism in his every poetic expression. To awake patriotism and nationalism in young Indians Derozio sang the glory and grandeur of the golden past of history in his poems which fired patriotic passions in young minds.

Keywords: Patriotism, Nationalism, Religion Bengal Renaissance, Derozio,

The nineteenth century Bengali literature is not a product of the continuous on-going literary tradition of the land. To understand the motives of the nineteenth century Bengali literature we must know the socio-political changes of the century and the conquest of Bengal in the late 18th century by the British East India Company. It is not a product of a sudden upsurge of literary geniuses who started to excel in isolation. The changes that characterise the Bengali literary tradition of the nineteenth century are deeply and thoroughly influenced by the social reform movement known as the Bengal Renaissance. The Bengal Renaissance was a cultural, social, intellectual and artistic movement in Bengal region of the Indian Subcontinent during the period of the British rule, from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century dominated by the educated Brahmos and the Bengali Hindus. For about a century, Bengal's conscious awareness and the changing modern world were more developed and ahead of the rest of India. The role played by the Bengal in the modern awakening of India is thus comparable to the position occupied by Italy in the European Renaissance. Very much like the Italian Renaissance, it was not a mass movement; but

instead restricted to the upper classes. The Bengal Renaissance can be said to have started with Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772– 1833) and ended with Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), although there have been many uncompromising individuals thereafter embodying particular aspects of the unique intellectual and creative output. The nineteenth-century Bengal was a unique blend of religious and social reformers, scholars, literary giants, journalists, patriotic orators and scientists, all merging to form the image of a renaissance, and marked the transition from the 'medieval' to the 'modern'.

The conquest of Bengal by the English was not only a political revolution, but ushered in a greater revolution in thoughts and ideas, in religion and society. Thus, the Bengal Renaissance is the result of the impact of the British rule, their exploitation and expansion of empire. It is the awakening of national consciousness of people with new light and new thought. It is a kind of socio-cultural change which is the result of the union between two cultures – the east and the west. The light of renaissance ignited nationalism and secular humanism in human minds, encouraged people to learn Western literature and philosophy for the rediscovery the world with new outlook, urged Indians to fight against all social diseases, inspired us to develop intellectual vision and to seek Truth, and above all, stirred up us to rediscover our cultural heritage, cultural treasures and to understand the glory of our ancient civilization. This reawakening for renaissance spread the seeds of patriotism for national movement and prepared people for national interest. To create this national interest or to awake patriotism in national minds poets and writers had their significant role. Slowly they sow the seeds of patriotism in the young minds of India. In this paper I would like to throw some light on some of the Derozio's selected poems where we feel the spirits of patriotism and nationalism as well.

Derozio was an Indian poet and assistant headmaster of Hindu College, Kolkata; a radical thinker and one of the first Indian educators to disseminate Western learning and science among the young men of Bengal. In that time the Hindu society in Bengal was undergoing considerable turmoil. In 1828, Raja Ram Mohan Roy established the Brahmo Samaj, which kept Hindu ideals but denied idolatry. This resulted in a backlash within orthodox Hindu society. It is in the perspective of these changes that Derozio was appointed at Hindu college, where he helped released the ideas for social change already in the air. At 17 years of age, he was considered a great scholar and a thinker. Within a short period of time, he drew around him a group of intelligent boys in college. He constantly encouraged them to think freely, to question and not to accept anything blindly. His teachings inspired the development of the spirit of liberty, equality and freedom. His activities brought about intellectual revolution in Bengal. It was called the Young Bengal Movement and his students, also known as Derozians, were fiery patriots.

Derozio was generally considered an Anglo-Indian, being of mixed Portuguese descent, but he was fired by a patriotic spirit for his native Bengal, and considered himself Indian. Derozio was perhaps the first nationalist poet of Modern India. Derozio had his burning passion for freedom and intoxicating urge for liberation from all kinds of bondages. He was a powerful catalytic agent of massive socio-cultural changes that took place under the influence of Renaissance. If we understand Derozio and his poems, we can understand that there is reflection of patriotism in his every poetic expression. He is acknowledged as first Indo-Anglian poet. K. S. Ramamurti in his introduction of his anthology – *'Twenty-five*

Indian Poets in English’ said, “Indian poetry in English is said to have begun with Henry Louis Vivian Derozio who was not only a poet but also a teacher of poet.” As a teacher of poets he infused in the minds of his young students the feelings of patriotism with his poems.

To awake patriotism and nationalism in young Indians Derozio sang the glory and grandeur of the golden past of history in his poems which fired patriotic passions in young minds. ‘*The Fakir of Jungheera*’, ‘*The Magnus Opus*’, ‘*To India-My Native Land*’, ‘*The Harp of India*’, ‘*To the Pupils of the Hindoo College*’ and ‘*The Golden Vase*’ are some of the Derozio’s selected poems which are patriotic in passion and powerful to ignite patriotism in mind. He was really a moving spirit of patriotism. M. K. Naik remarks in his book ‘*A History of Indian English Literature*’ – “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 Peoples of the Hindoo College*’ have an unmistakable authenticity of patriotic utterance which stamps Derozio as an Indian English poet who in truly a son of the soil.”

‘*The Fakeer of Jungheera*’ is one of the most significant landmarks in the history of patriotic poetry in India. In his days Bengal faced many problems of caste and creed. The reassessment and inclusion of Derozio in the canon of Indian writing in English has to do with many factors like communism, religious aspects, colonial aspects. In the poem Derozio mixed the tantric, Hindu, mythological, Islamic and Christian tradition. Here, in it Fakeer is the follower of Islam. ‘Fakeer’ means saint- a person who has renounced the world but here he loves a upper caste lady Nuleeni, who is married to a Brahmin. Her husband dies in an early youth. She doesn't want to end her life behind a person whom she never loved. She escaped death but she starts a life of forbidden love though frightened by violent social norms. She believes that her lover’s courage and her unflinching love will finally make them victorious. Her fair and beautiful face brightens the dark social setting of the poem and mitigates the bold audacity of the Fakeer who snatches her from the midst of a group of mourning upper caste Hindu at the funeral. The poet says:

“O! For the speed of swiftest hound
 At once into her arms to bound!
 O! for the speed of sunny beam,
 Or eagle’s wing, or airy dream,
 Or lightning glance of rapid eye
 From younger rocky height to fly.”

Thus, the poem surpasses religious barriers as well as caste problems and unites the two souls, which mingles with the nationalistic feelings and arouses the oneness among us. Really, in the pre-independence era and, particularly, in the nineteenth century triumphing over all the social barriers setting up the oneness feelings by an Anglo-Indian poet was an admirable and indispensable act.

The poem ‘*The Harp of India*’ is an address to the harp. Here Derozio grieves at the lost glory of India and desires to reclaim the golden glory. Patriotism is blended here with Byronic melancholy as his verse is the echo of the voice of Byron and Moore. Derozio’s love for past glory is actually ingrained in his patriotic spirit. The octave tells the decadent and sorry condition of the harp, which

lies unstrung on a lonely, withered bough, bound in the fatal chain of silence. In the sestet, the poet invokes the musicians of the past whose worthy hands once created many sweet melodies on the harps. Finally he wishes –

*“–but if thy notes divine
May be by mortal wakened once again,
Harp of my country, let me strike the strain!”*

So the poet is optimistic. The poem ends with hope of renewal. He wishes divine notes of the harp, “*Harp of my country*” can be revived once again. In the expression ‘my country’ we feel the poet’s deep love and patriotism for our country.

Derozio was popular among his students for his patriotism, wisdom and deep knowledge. He is supposed to be the first poet in Bengal who wrote patriotic sonnet ‘*To India – My Native Land*’. This poem is included at first in his long poem ‘*The Fakir of Jungheera*’. In this poem Derozio again glorified Indian golden past. He imagines India as a goddess for her halo of glory. He utters –

*“My country, in thy days of glory past
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow
And worshipped as a deity”*

Derozio desires to revive the past glory with patriotic devotion. He

writes – *“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.”*

R. K. Dasgupta has written that Derozio’s sonnet ‘*To India-My Native Land*’ is “....*The poetical expression of our new patriotism....when Derozio wrote these lines, there was no patriotic song in the Bengali language and not many songs composed several decades later seemed to echo the sentiments of these first poems of our nationalist airs.... its significance in the history of Indian patriotism is that it is more than paean of our ancient glory; it is also a vow of service to the country.*”

The poem ‘*To the Pupils of the Hindu College*’ is in the form of a sonnet that eulogizes the cotemporary youth. According to the speaker, the students expand like the petals of a young flower in the practice of blooming. The metaphor of the flower connotes ideas of the prospects of blossoming coupled with a sense of freshness, rawness, emanating fragrance and essence, rendering the whole process natural. There is also the implication of a new vision or perspective. The poet watches the gentle opening of their minds as it gradually unfolds like the fragile petals of a flower. They are all united in the awe and inspiration that education instils in them. Derozio tries to bring in the truth; he was against the conventional dogmatic constructs that was far from the rational. Joyance showers on him like blessings as he pictures the students not only blooming but blossoming into the famous intellectuals of tomorrow. They are the “mirror of futurity” in that they reflect the future and also his teaching for posterity. They will weave their chaplets of knowledge or the title that will adorn

their identities. Thereby, the speaker will feel that his knowledge has not been in vain, as it survives even after his death. He says:

*“What joyance rains upon me, when I see
Fame in the mirror of futurity,
Weaving the chaplets you are yet to gain-
And then I feel I have not lived in vain.”*

Mr. Oaten states *“For in both Keats and Derozio there was a passionate temperament combined with unbounded sympathy with nature and fellowmen. Both died while their powers were not yet fully developed.”*

Derozio’s passions for liberty and patriotic inspiration are well expressed in his short poems. In the Hindu College he taught Greek history and the two great epics of Homer- ‘*The Iliad*’ and ‘*The Odyssey*’. The Greeks were his inspiration. Greece was a symbol of liberty, bravery and patriotism. In this glorious civilization emancipation was the only motto and patriotism was in their blood. Derozio’s short poems – ‘*The Greeks at Marathon*’, ‘*Address to the Greeks*’, ‘*Thermopylae*’ and ‘*Freedom to the Slave*’ had the fire of patriotism.

In the ‘*Address to the Greeks*’ he wrote –
*“The ground that ye tread, by your fathers was trod
Their bloodshed for freedom has hallowed the sod”*

Here the Greeks are encouraged to go ahead, the heroism of the ancient Greeks is praised, urge for freedom is highlighted and their patriotic spirit is glorified. This poetic call is actually to ingrain patriotic urge in the minds of freedom lovers of any civilization. In the same poem the lines – *“Strike, strike, as yours fathers of old would have done
Unite and the field with your liberty’s won!”*- are inspiring and patriotic to the march of victories in war not only to the Greeks but also any freedom loving civilization.

In the poem ‘*Greece*’ Derozio recasts the glorious history of the Greeks to inspire them in the battle against Turkees. The European countries did not help the Greeks in their crises where Greece contributed much to European civilization. So Derozio writes –

*“Will Europe hear? Ah! No-ah! No-
She coldly turns from thee,
Thine own right arm, and battle-blade
Must win the victory.”*

Here the song of ultimate victory is sung with patriotic passion which may inspire any chained country.

‘*The Greeks at Marathon*’ is written to celebrate the victory of the Greeks in the battle of Marathon. Patriotic heroes are glorified and deified here for winning freedom of their country. The poet writes –

*“This is freedoms hallowed earth,
Hallowed by a deed of worth;
Let another such be done
On this field of Marathon,
Seek we freedom? Grecian, on!”*

Freedom's field is Marathon."

The patriotic fervour also finds poetic revelation in his poem 'Independence'. The flame of freedom in his heart may succumb to a stormy wind. The poet writes –
"My heart and shall the little lamp
My glorious image be...."

The poem, 'The Freedom to the Slave' is also an echo of patriotic passion of fiercely freedom loving spirits. In this poem the poet pays tribute to all who are fighting for freedom. He writes – "And glory to the breast that bleeds
Bleeds nobly to be free!
Blest be the generous hand that breaks
The chain that a tyrant gave,
And feeling for degraded man
Gives freedom to the slave"

This poem is applicable not only to the slave but all the freedom loving people.

Derozio was out and out an Indian patriot. Patriotism is the main inspiration in every vein of his poems. He is the first to sing of freedom that lights the altar of soul with everlasting flame. His poetic outburst in light of Renaissance was most remarkable part of his patriotic feelings with the then Bengali society. Through his poetry he wanted to make us rational against all kinds of superstitions. This noble person tried hard to remove the barriers between the higher and the lower class, between the rich and the poor, and, of course, between the two major religious peoples- the Hindus and the Muslims. Thus, we can say that his sole purpose was to educate the then superstitious people and to awake them with the co-operative feelings as well as with the feelings of their rights and responsibilities for their country. This way, he planted the seeds of patriotism and nationalism in the minds of his pupils and his countrymen. His poems are really pregnant with patriotism and nationalism.

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