

Concretizing Indianness: Exploring Nationalist Sentiment In ‘To India, My Native Land’ By Henry Derozio

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Abstract

This research article conducts a critical examination of the development of a nationalist identity or “Indianness” by Henry Derozio in his poem “To India, My Native Land”. Through close scrutiny of its motifs, history, themes, literary devices and roots in Indian history and culture, this study excavates the ways in which Derozio appeals to the beleaguered consciousness of the downtrodden collective in a colonized nation. It brings to light various facets of the poem and how they weave together a literary awakening of the Indian mind, promoting it to resistance and championing independence through the poetics of memory, loss, and culture. Furthermore, the question of the poet’s dual identity as a Eurasian man and its importance in the colonised-coloniser dichotomy is pondered upon. Ultimately, the article attempts to elucidate the extent to which Derozio, through his poem is able to formulate the notion of Indianness in a nation steadily losing hope and identity under colonial oppression.

Keywords: Derozio, nationalism, hybridity, Indian identity, colonial literature

The poem “To India, My Native Land” by Henry Louis Vivian Derozio anatomizes the soul and the identity of a nation as it comes apart at the seams even as its writer scrambles desperately to stitch it back together while himself being ensnared in the turmoil of what it means to be Indian during a time when the very spirit of Indian-ness is slipping away like grains of sand. Derozio’s poem, while on the surface has been widely read as an attempt to revitalize the fallen, singular grandeur of his homeland in the hearts of his people, it could also be understood as a study in the constitution of the collective consciousness of the colonized imagination trying to decolonize itself and regain its identity, in a socio-historical and cultural context.

It also raises the question of whether a language that is fundamentally as much a part of the oppressor can be reclaimed as a tool to obtain freedom by the oppressed. It is to be acknowledged that Indian writing in English is as much a relic of imperial antiquity as it is a fundamental tenet of post-colonial literature. To ruminate upon and decidedly establish a politically appropriate meeting ground for both the scarred past and the rebellious present, a direct confrontation with the moral and socio-cultural incongruities and the withered fabric of its history is imperative.

Derozio's primary motive with the poem is a reintroduction to the present and future generations, the dignified status and magnificent grandeur that his country once enjoyed. It is to be noted that Derozio does not fault or bemoan a fall from grace for his motherland but instead renders buoyancy to its past greatness and juxtaposes it with the present reality. By depicting the bygone grandeur and greatness of India, Derozio expects to galvanize the youth into frenetic activity with a determination to regain and re-establish India's glory and reverence. It is to be noted that even though he laments the loss of the splendid antiquity of India to British imperialism, he does so in a language not native to the country, but one that belongs to the very oppressor whose presence he bemoans. In this, one might perceive a certain conflict, a dichotomy in the identity of the poet: the need to reconstruct the sense of what it meant to be Indian, tussling with the intrinsic thirst for knowledge quenched only by the respite of Western education and enlightenment.

If one part of Derozio was the man who pioneered the dissemination of occidental pedagogy and extreme Westernisation among the Hindu upper echelons, there was quite paradoxically a part of him that was also an ardent Indian Patriot. He professed his love for India while condemning and deploring her state of enslavement and fall from grace under British enslavement. He desperately sought to awaken his countrymen to the dire state of the nation and called for her freedom.

Through the usage of the iambic pentameter and a rhyme scheme reminiscent of Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti*, Derozio channels the innate patriotism he felt towards the nation he was born in, despite his inheritance of a hybrid lineage from his white mother and Indian father. He grew up in Calcutta, West Bengal, and while he carried within him both the blood of the oppressor and the oppressed, he never once teetered upon the moral boundary that determined one's allegiance to either side of the conflict; as reflected in his poem, he never once faltered in his patriotic ardour and denunciation of white imperialism.

Critics and scholars have developed a discourse that the process of decolonization comprises an establishment of self-representation, an exercise in restoring an authentic relationship between representation and reality. Derozio, in his poem, attempts to do so by taking a deep dive into what he considers the origin of the identity of an Indian: the glorious past. This fervent and impassioned nationalist zeal was not commonplace and rather surprising in a man with Eurasian roots, given that the average member of his community was prone to repudiate or denounce his Indian blood and reconcile his identity to that of a white man. This pronounced utterance of patriotic sentiment that Derozio displayed in his craft set him apart and branded him as an authentic son of the Indian soil.

Even as Derozio struggles to bridge the chasm of his western inclination and love for the motherland within himself, he attempts to deploy a wake-up call to his fellow Indians to rise and re-instill the essence of the grand Indian spirit within themselves, the tug of which he feels within his self, germinating in the turbulent coil of his past. A scintillating stalwart of the literary tradition based on nationalistic sentiment, Derozio was among the first Indian writers to employ patriotism as a theme in poetry within the geopolitical context of the Indian subcontinent, and later inspired legions of new writers to follow in his footsteps.

The Poem as a National Reconstruction

The poem by Derozio can be seen as a way of reclaiming culture, a literary rebuilding of the Indian identity. The British Raj, which had colonized the land in the early nineteenth century, had tried to restructure the consciousness of the people, too. English education in India was not just an intellectual project, as Gauri Viswanathan claims in her book *Mask of Conquest*, but rather a mechanism of control that was meant to instill colonial ideology in the colonized mind. The interaction of Derozio with the English language, thus, is a form of complicity and resistance: he turns a language of conquest into a language of liberation. Through the English language in glorifying the Indian past, he successfully reverses the symbolic course of power.

In addition, the poem is an early expression of what later scholars would refer to as proto-nationalism. The verse of Derozio gave an embryonic expression of opposition before other Indian writers, such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee or Rabindranath Tagore, gave an expression of Indian nationalism with increased potency. His mourning for the lost glory of India is not only nostalgic but also a performance, since it seeks to bring people into political awareness by invoking long-buried memories. The poet looks at the chains shackling India not only at the individual level, but also en masse; he thereby tries to transform grief into inspiration.

The Role of Memory and Loss

The main theme of loss in “To India, My Native Land” is used as a historical and psychological metaphor. The poem builds memory as a place of dignity, a place where the nation will be able to find its lost identity. The lamentation “Where is thy glory, where the reverence now?” -- is more than sentimentality, transcending mere emotions to become a critical historiography of the trauma of colonization. In his work *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon points out that re-taking history is a crucial process of decolonization. In that sense, the memory of India of the days of its glory in the past is a subversive act by Derozio, against the colonial discourse of Indian inferiority.

Besides, the process of recalling is also political in colonial terms. Memory is a challenge to the amnesia of empire. The poetry of Derozio, therefore, transforms itself into a mnemonic location in which the national identity is not only reflected but also restored. His appeal to the high reputation of India is a weapon against the psychological obliteration caused by imperialism.

Hybrid Identity and Cultural Ambivalence

The Eurasian identity of Derozio has put him at a crossroads of race, culture, and belonging. In the theory of hybridity expressed by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, there is a third, more amorphous space that disrupts the dichotomies of colonizer and colonized. Derozio is a representative of this ambivalence: the Western education and Indian patriotism are in a dialectic of tension and synthesis. Instead of living between two worlds, he takes his dual heritage as a platform on which to criticize both.

In “To India, My Native Land”, this hybridity is expressed through his language, a colonial language, but filled with native passion. His status as a Eurasian becomes symbolic of the self of India itself, as it was divided by the colonialists. The poem, therefore, has autobiographical undertones; it is not merely about the loss of sovereignty of India but also a reflection of the quest for wholeness of the poet himself. The personal reconciliation of Derozio is a reflection of the national desire to determine its culture.

Derozio and the Early Indian Nationalism

Derozio was a revolutionary nationalist in the environment of early nineteenth-century Bengal. The Bengal Renaissance was yet to mature, and the intellectual discussion was dominated by colonial paradigms. The awakening that Derozio urges is pre-political, and it foreshadows political nationalism with the help of literary consciousness. This influence was further enhanced by his work as a teacher at Hindu College; the spirit of rational inquiry and reform that grew around him in the Young Bengal Movement eventually gave way to nationalist politics.

As critics like M. K. Naik have noted, the poetry of Derozio is the first expression of an Indian identity that was both critical of colonialism and self-reflective about its own comity with Western modernity. He has not only criticized imperialism but also tried to revive the moral and intellectual possibilities of the Indian self. By so doing, Derozio was able to intersect both the moral and political aspects of nationalism, and poetry turned into pedagogy.

The Aesthetics of Resistance

The stylistic decisions in “To India, My Native Land”, its solemn tone, high diction, and neoclassical image-making, are indicative of the fact that Derozio is indulging in the Western literary traditions despite undermining them. His Spenserian rhyme pattern is not an imitation but a mastery; he takes the shape of the colonizer to convey the pain of the colonized. The rigor of iambic pentameter is a metaphor of control and sanity in the anarchy of oppression.

His use of apostrophes also helps to build this aesthetic of resistance. The poet directly talks to India as the native land, personifying it as a living being that can be redeemed. This apostrophic form makes the poem a conversation between the poet and the nation- a performative process of reawakening. According to Elleke Boehmer, in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, these kinds of poetic personification usually serve to signify the start of a national allegory, in which the personal voice becomes interchangeable with the collective.

Spiritual Aspects of Nationality

In addition to the political lamentation, the poem by Derozio also has a spiritual undertone. The repentance and reverence in the poem’s tone resemble that of a deity’s acolyte. The concept of the fallen goddess- India used to be great, now she is dethroned- invokes the traditional image of the Indian mythological goddess. The importance of this personification is that it combines the Western poetic standards with the Indian metaphysical symbols.

In this context, the attempt by Derozio to elevate nationalism to a pedestal of deified sanctity is subtle. The rebuilding of Indian glory, thus, is not only a political but a moral project- a redemption of the national soul. The spirituality of the poem is therefore interwoven with its politics and, hence, an early form of cultural nationalism, which was to be more fully expressed in the works of Aurobindo Ghose and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, finds nascent development in Derozio's poem.

Conclusion

"To India, My Native Land" by Henry Derozio is one of the classic works of Indian nationalist genealogy. It is not just a nostalgic lament but a cultural revival manifesto. Derozio creates a song of freedom through the words of the conqueror. His poem serves as a premonition of the intellectual awakening that would come to define the freedom struggle in India, and continues to permeate nationalist consciousness as a reminder of the efficacy of poetry as resistance.

When conceiving Indian-ness, Derozio is in a state of contradiction, linguistic, racial, and cultural, and converts it into creative energy. His anguished and assertive voice signifies the birth of an Indian consciousness that cannot be erased. The poem thus holds a very significant place not just in the history of literature but also in the history of the self-conception of India as a nation.

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