

Derozio: the first indo- Anglian poet

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Indo-Anglian poetry started with Henry Louis Vivian Derozio who was born of an Indian mother and a Portuguese father. By now, Indo-Anglian poetry is a full-fledged entity with a respectable position among the literatures of the various Indian languages. That a young man with a mixed parentage happens to be the first Indo-Anglian poet is a matter of considerable significance. What kind of a person was this literary pioneer? What is his total achievement as a poet?

Derozio was born in 1803 and died prematurely in 1831 at the age of 29. He started writing verse at an early age. When he was just 14, he became a clerk in a firm. He would compose English verse even while he laboured on his job. Happily his poetic activity caught the attention of one Dr. John Grant of Calcutta who helped even to join as a teacher of English at the Hindu collage, the first educational institution of its kind in the establishment of which Raja Ram Mohan Roy had “played a leading role”¹. The Hindu collage obviously has been found to impart English education to the Indian pupils so that they might shed their traditional largely medieval moorings and thus initiate social reforms. And Derozio, as a teacher, pursued the goal with such zeal that he soon became a gadfly to the collage management. So, he had to quit to become a journalist. He died of cholera on December 23, 1831.

Derozio served the Hindu Collage only for three years. But what he did during this short span of time has been vividly recounted by Hara Mohan Chatterjee, a contemporary. In fact, Mr. Derozio gained such a great ascendancy over the minds of his pupils that they would not move even in their private affairs without his advice. On the other hand, he fostered their taste in literature, taught the evil effects of idolatry and superstition and they refined their moral feelings as to place them completely above the antiquated ideas and aspirations of the age. Such was the force of his instructions that the conduct of his students out of the collage was exemplary.²

Thus, the first Indo – Anglian poet was also a child of the Indian Renaissance. What we call the Indian Renaissance was the resurgence of the dormant Indian Soul, and as we have seen Derozio was one of those rare men who contributed to this reawakening. For he succeeded because of his tremendous enthusiasm, in giving a boost to this process of change by inculcating in his pupils “progressive ideas.” It certainly augured well for Indo - Anglian poetry as it was initiated by this large hearted and keen minded lad.

In the apt world of V.K. Gokak, “Indo -Anglian poetry was born under a Romantic star. It learned to lips in the manner of Byron and Scott in the verse of Derozio, M.M. Dutt and others, It began with verse romances and lyrics written in the romantic vein.”³ Really, the first Indo - Anglian poet was out and out a romantic. His lyrical pieces as well as the ‘Fakir of Jungeera’, his lone narrative poem, are all of them intensely romantic and have an air of nostalgia hanging about them.

Derozio’s poetry on the whole is not highly meritorious and still his poems quite impress us because of their ardour. Patriotic fervour characterizes some of his poems. In ‘The Harp of India’,³ for example, the poet sings of the bygone glory of his Motherland with such feeling as to completely overwhelm the reader. The harp lies on a “withered bough” – “neglected muse and desolate.” But it was not so always.

They music once was sweet-who hears it now?

It looks

Like ruined mountain on desert plain:

The poem closes with the poet’s fond wish that he himself might play on the silent harp

Harp of my country, let me strike the strain!

With its stock images and rather sentimental tone, the poem cannot claim any artistic excellence. Still the poet’s patriotic ardour warms up the entire piece. The poet’s unconcealed feeling for the said plight of his native land is expressed in the context of her British subjugation which makes the whole things marvellously touching. In yet another sonnet, the poet bewails the sad lot of the country:

My counter! in the days of glory past

A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,

And worshipped as a deity thou west-

Where is that glory, where that reverence now?⁴

The poet's love for India knows no bound, and in his 'Evening in August',⁵ he sings of the Ganga feelingly :

Roll on fair Ganga! what a noble stream!

Derozio, as we have seen, was an ideal teacher, and 'To the pupils of the Hindu collage'⁶ brings out the poet's profound affection for his pupils:

Expanding like the petals of young flowers

I watch the gentle opening for your minds,

In this poem also, it is the poet's feeling for his pupils that is deeply touching. Moreover, these shorter pomes are "often sensuous and finely articulate."⁷

'The Fakir of Jungheera' was perhaps the poet's "most ambitious" work. It narrates the story of Nuleeni, a Brahmin widow. The poem is set in those dark times when the terrible practice of Sutee was in vogue. Nuleeni too is to burn on the funeral pyre of her dead husband when she is carried away by Fakir who happens to be her former lover. Nuleeni is intensely happy in the love of Fakir. But he is attacked by her father and his men, and the Fakir dies fighting. The following lines describe Nuleeni's shock at her husband's death:

It is a dream, or does the night deceive?

She looks again – she trembles – must believe.

Tis he – that robber – not victorious now –

The cold death – damp descending on his brow,

Embracing her dead husband, Nuleeni passes away.

Dr. K. R. S. Iyengar finds 'The Fakir of Jungeera' "competent narrative verse with many Byronic echoes and the ardent social reformer too peeps through the poem with a face contorted by pain and also lit up with a hope for the future"⁸. The poem obviously was composed also to condemn the terrible practice of Sutee or widow – burning. So, Derozio remains a reformer both in life and letters! The poet tells the story quite vividly. Dr. Iyengar rightly says, the poem is full of Romantic echoes.

This brief account of the mind and art of the first Indo-Anglian poet makes one point very clear: his greatness as a man from which follows his disarming sincerity as a poet. He doubtless belongs to the high company of those men and women who worked relentlessly for the Indian Reawakening. Indeed, the first Indo-Anglian was a true Renaissance man who loved his country and countrymen passionately and worked every moment of his short life for the rejection of outdated ideas and practices. Because of his premature end, he could not mature as a poet. But his large soul animates whatever he has written. Out of his composition emerges a radiant personality who deeply loved his native land and was also conscious of the great Indian cultural heritage. Happily, his poetic talent went with a true reformist zeal which profoundly inspired a whole generation making him one of the makers of modern Bengal.

References:

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