

Poems of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio: Texts and Notes

This e-content is for

M.A. Sem III Class

It contains material for the Paper. Unit and Text as indicated below.

Paper X(B): Indian Literature in English

Unit II: Poetry. Texts: 'The Harp of India' and 'To India- My Native Land' by Henry Derozio

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Henry Louis Vivian Derozio:

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was one of those rare poets, as Mary Ellis Gibson has observed, who at an early age achieved both passionate engagement with and sceptical detachment from his circumstances. In Derozio's case, the circumstances are different. In spite of being born to an English mother and a father with Portuguese and Indian ancestors, Derozio has been claimed as the first Indian poet writing in English. Much of his works has significantly addressed issues of Indian identity and the country's future. In the words of Gibson, rather than defining India through appeals to ethnicity, religion or nature, Derozio explored these issues in a global philosophical and literary context. His own hybrid identity and philosophical training enabled him, even during his short life, to write poems that have had a lasting impact on Indian writing in English.

After finishing the education, Derozio shortly assisted his father in his business before being appointed teacher of history and philosophy at the Hindu College. Quite popular among the students who grew more and more engaged in the philosophical and religious discussions that led them to declare their religious scepticism, Derozio along with the enthusiastic students set up the Hindu College Academic Association, a debating society that began to question and challenge all sorts of orthodoxies. His students and followers were collectively called "Young Bengal" who brought about intellectual movement in Bengal disturbing the status quo. He was forced to resign after the outraged parents of the students who openly proclaimed their atheism protested against him. He served as a journalist thereafter until he succumbed to cholera at the age of twenty two.

Derozio is an important figure in Indian literature not only because he was at the source of the phenomenon today called Indian writing in English, but also in that he had played a significant role in some of the earliest attempts at the creation and definition of a modern Indian identity. Derozio's work, as Rosinka Chaudhuri has argued, notwithstanding his marginality in the context of contemporary Indian society, led to a forceful centrifugal dissemination of the idea of the Indian nation as 'my native land' radiating from him in the early nineteenth century. These influential ideas and images of the nation were envisaged by him in poetry and practice long before such conceptions found currency even in the 'political rhetoric,' so important in moulding consciousness that some critics have mentioned as preceding political activism. His sonnets "The Harp of India" and "To India- My Native Land" have remained important for generations as simultaneously representing the stimulus of English language poetry and the first poetic expression in English of an emergent Indian nationalism. Henry Derozio earnestly wanted modern Indian aesthetics to have a didactic purpose and to be concerned with addressing larger social and political issues. Elizabethans and Romantics earned Derozio's wrath for leading mankind to a disgusting state. One fact that is clearly stated in Derozio's declaration on aesthetics is that it is the sacred duty of literature to uplift the society as far as moral and intellectual life is concerned. Anti-establishment stance and religious mysticism of the Romantics found favour with Derozio even after his criticism of Romantic Poetry Christian devotional mysticism of the English Romantics and Scottish skepticism of David Hume were formative influences on Derozio.

The Harp of India

Why hang'st 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
Of flowers still blooming on the minstrel's grave:
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 Harp of India is a patriotic poem of Derozio highlighting revolutionary zeal of the poet. It is a patriotic poem that pays a splendid homage to the rich tradition of the art of Indian poetry which conveys the poet's deep anguish at the decline of the age of old art under the slavish shackles of British supremacy. In the poem The Harp of India, the poet Derozio- a passionate admirer of India's rich heritage, culture and tradition- laments the decline of the rich tradition of Indian literature during the period of British domination of India. The British imperialism made the Indian poets listless and they found nothing inspiring to compose literature except the misery of the nation. Derozio pays a rich tribute to the Indian writers of the past who had enriched the Indian literature with their classic and enduring literary works and then expresses his wish to renew and invigorate, through his humble poetic efforts, the richness and glory of Indian literature. Derozio has used 'Harp' as a means to portray the rich and varied culture and traditions that India possessed and which were now being suppressed by the British raj. The poem is suffused with the sense of lost glory and the consciousness of debilitating cultural decline. The withered bough, the unstrung harp, the ruined monument, the cold hands of the dead poets--all these images suggest the sorry condition of the country at present. Yet, the poet is not entirely without hope. If the divine notes of the harp can be revived once again, he wishes to strike the first note. The poem, then, ends with the hope of renewal, but more importantly, on the personal note of the poet's sense of his own role in that revival. Derozio is aware of his being a front runner in this process.

Reading of The Harp of India brings to light both an intense awareness of and concern for India's shackled state and also an undying hope of a bright future through the restoration of the country's lost dignity and glory. This analogy is intended to draw our attention to three states, a glorious past that is lost, a desolate present and an inglorious future. So far as future is concerned, there is a strong possibility of the mute instrument's regaining its power once it gets into able hands. Derozio waits eagerly for the arrival of poets empowered to sing the song of India. The harp that he directs our attention to is the immediate and the particular but more important than the single 'lonely' harp is the miserable state of India bent double under the burden of slavery. For the harp, however, there is a future as there is a strong possibility of the mute instrument's regaining its power once able hands touch its strings. And Derozio waits eagerly for the arrival of poets empowered to sing the song of India.

To India- My Native Land

My country! In thy days of glory past
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow
and worshipped as a deity thou wast—
Where is thy glory, where the reverence now?
Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last,
And grovelling 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 these 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!

These themes of the fact of decline, the possibilities of renewal, and the poet's own role in it recur in the other sonnet, "To India-My Native Land" too. Here, the ideology of nationalism is quite direct and unambiguous: "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?". Derozio's approach to his subject clearly shows the influence of the Orientalist literature which was being published at this time. The work of William Jones, H. H. Wilson, Thomas Munro and others had established that ancient India had a great civilization. Derozio, however, uses this idea of past glory only to stress the present decay: "Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last,/ And grovelling in the lowly dust art thou". Such images underscore the loss of freedom and dignity, both; being Enlightenment values, which had come to India in their present garb through the Western impact.

At the turn from the octave to the sestet, Derozio foregrounds himself and the possibilities of his own role as a poet. He says that because he cannot sing of anything but the country's misery at present, he would like to "dive into the depths of time,/ And bring from out the ages that have rolled/ A few fragments of those wrecks sublime,/ Which human eye may never more behold". For this service, he expects nothing from his "fallen country" except a "kind wish". Derozio, of course, died young, so it is impossible to judge if he, too, would have gone the way of the Orientalists, retrieving a few fragments of those "wrecks sublime" from the past. At any rate, we know that he did not live to fulfil the promise that he makes in this poem.

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