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# **A Study of Henry Derozio as an Anti-Colonial Poet**

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India was colonised for more than one hundred and fifty years. One of the prominent responses, during this time, was in the form of writing and that, too, in the language of the coloniser. In the last two-three decades, the contemporary studies of the postcolonial criticism have interest in studying the social identities authored and authorized by the colonised or the colonialism. Inspired from this interest, the paper tries to study Henry Derozio, a poet of the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, famously known as Indian Keats, India's first national, modern poet as an anti-colonial poet. His poetry focused in the paper includes 'Fakeer of Jungheera', his chef-d'oeuvre, and poetry on women emancipation and nationalistic sonnets which set a tone for the rest to follow.

Despite being a progeny of a mixed parentage with an English first name and a Portuguese surname: Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831), the Eurasian poet was highly passionate about India and considered it as his motherland. He wrote numerous poems with patriotic zeal and nationalistic reformation. He is credited for the inception of Indian Poetry in English with his 'Sonnet to Night' published in *India Gazette* in 1822.

His 'Fakeer of Jungheera' is born of poetic genius, enlighten social concern of a native 'poem of two cantos without a plot and with few incidents' (Edwards 148) narrated over 2050 lines in English when Derozio was just nineteen. Basically, *the Fakeer* highlights two issues of the contemporary society: one is the evil performances of rituals of *Sati* and secondly, fate of love and marriage between the inter-religion people of the rigid and conservative society. The poem represents Derozio's secularism and reformist zeal along with the Indianness of the theme.

In this poem, Derozio mystifies nature with descriptions of winds, the sun, butterfly and bee in the opening stanza are mysteriously elaborating the movements in the nature. It is narrated such that it creates a mysterious atmosphere in accordance with the character of Fakeer and Jungheera's rock,

High on the hugest granite pile  
Of that grey barren craggy isle,  
A small rude hut unsheltered stand-  
Erected by no earthly hands;  
And never sinful foot might dare  
To find its way unbidden there. (Chaudhari 176)



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Derozio mentions Fakeer as ‘the demon – cause of all!’ with these lines: ‘The pleasant forced his home to flee, / The princely maiden’s treachery, / Her youthful lord’s untimely fall— / And he, the demon—cause of all!’ (Chaudhari 176) He further mystifies Fakeer in the next stanza:

Alas! In fairest seeming souls  
The tide of guilt all blackly rolls;  
And then they steal religion’s ray  
Upon its surface but to play:  
As o’er the darkest sea a gleam  
Of brightest sunshine oft may beam,  
Gilding the wave while dark beneath  
Are lurking danger, woe, and death. (Chaudhari 176)

The mysterious description in the poem remains indebted to Byron’s mysticism. The character of Fakeer seems to be following the traits of Byronic Hero – an anti-hero. Nair states on the ambiguity around the character of Fakeer as:

For the advocates of love and liberty, like the poet himself, this lover of Nuleeni is indeed a Fakeer, a living embodiment of the most divine of all human emotions- love, a man who has renounced all that is material in his quest for the bliss of love, a man who had no qualms about extinguishing his material self, to gain the ultimate bliss possible only through his union with Nuleeni. Thus, while he is the saint for the disciples of love, he is the villain for those who consider the divine emotion of love, as a means for furthering immediate material goals. He is a dacoit only for those uninitiated into the divine ways of the heart, for they would consider him a criminal because he has tried to rob the unfair society of something it holds in high esteem – its age old exploitative traditions and customs. (Chaudhari 37)

With this ambiguity, Derozio portrays Fakeer as a Byronic Hero who has a troubled past, though being a Muslim boy, disdained customs and traditions of the society and loved a Hindu Brahmin girl named Nuleeni. As society did not allow him to marry her, he decided to live a lonely natural life in an exile as an



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outlaw and outcast life of an unnamed bandit chief Fakeer. He rejects the social norms at the extent that he fiery rebels against the people who force Nuleeni to accomplish the rituals of *Sati*. He rescues her and later in the poem struggles in the battle-field with the ruler Prince Shoojah and his army until he is killed. With this mysterious character, Derozio makes the postcolonial reader to read the character of Fakeer symbolically as the one who rejects the colony and colonisers.

Besides 'Fakeer of Jungheera', his other long narrative poems similar in theme or tone composed under the Romantic vein are 'The Maniac Widow', 'Ada', 'The Bridal', 'Enchantress of the Cave', 'The Neglected Minstrel', 'The New Atlantis: a Fragment' and 'The Deserted Girl'. In which Derozio speaks of romantic love spirit. However, in this love spirit, researcher symbolically emphasizes on two things: first, the love for freedom from colonies and the lover to be glorious past of the ancient India. Secondly, Derozio's anti-colonial urges and tendencies.

'The Maniac Widow' is a poem narrating the tragic tale of a widowed lady driven to lunacy by the death of her warrior husband in a battlefield. The introductory lines of the poem like his chef-d'oeuvre 'Fakeer of Jungheera', centralize the theme of gloom by narrating longings of the central personage for her dead husband. Derozio also creates a sense of mysticism by creating gothic atmosphere questioning the contemporary colonisers symbolically in the following lines:

Long years have rolled; and fishermen say,  
That every year, on that sad day,  
Strange sounds are heard—and the waters rush  
Like passion's tumultuous, maddening gush;  
Then all is silent—and then a strain  
Like Syren's song is heard on the main,  
Sweeter than music of waves below,  
And thus, they say, the song doth flow: — (Chaudhari 100)



‘Ada’ is a poem representing an Indian theme of central character Ada’s choice of spending her life with a person of her choice against the rigid orthodoxy of society by eloping with her lover. The poem ‘The Enchantress of the Cave’, at some extent, resemble Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame San Merci’. Derozio tries to create a mystery in the poem by repetitively asking: ‘Why seeks Nazim the Witch of the Cave?’ (132) and by attributing Nazim traits of Byronic hero in the lines he himself answers: ...(Nazim seeks) ‘the Witch of the Cave...to know if all / Goes right and well in his distant hall; / How fares his sire, and how his son, / But chief the wife whom his heart doats on.’ (132) A hint is given that the Witch may not be so wan and grim as she seemed at first sight. The Witch, then, addresses the visitor and tries to find out the intentions to the ‘dreary and dark’ cave when he could have gone in search of ‘Jemshid’s gem’ or ‘The Seal of the fifth king’ or many such riches. Nazim’s love spirit is reflected when he politely tells to Witch after listening her long discourse that all the riches in the world pale in comparison to the love that his wife and he share and that all that he desired of the Witch was to know about the well-being of his wife. He says:

‘And oh! I could not calmly die  
‘Until I knew that all was well  
‘With her who claims my latest sigh—  
‘If thou thus much to me canst tell,  
‘If this thy dark, prophetic eye  
‘Can see—I seek nor sign nor spell.’ (Chaudhari 137)

Derozio represented patriotic spirit in the poem by suggesting that the Hindu valour of the bygone days is a ‘spirit of the past’ and that it existed ‘Ere exiled Freedom looked her last / On this delicious orient clime!’ (131) Commenting on Derozio’s treatment of the glorious Hindu past and Muslim bravery, Rosinka Chaudhuri writes:

Derozio was influenced by the prevalent fashionable Western interest in an exotic Muslim culture. At the same time, almost in opposition to that interest, Derozio’s demonization of Muslims (and, as we shall see, his glorification of ancient Hindu India) is a local, immediate and colonial project, conceived in the academic research of Orientalist scholars in Calcutta. The paradox in Derozio’s verse was that he was an enthusiastic exponent of both schools of thought, extolling Muslim cultural achievements while at the same time denouncing the



perceived aggressive and war like character of Muslims. (44)

Studying the Muslim terms Chakrabarti observes:

Derozio takes from Byron some of the Moslem terms to create the correct Moslem atmosphere in the poem : 'Afrit' ( 'a kind of Medusae' – Derozio's footnote to the word in *The Enchantress* ) and 'Eblis' ( 'the Muhammadan Pluto' – Derozio's footnote ). (17)

'The Golden Vase' is a love poem set in the medieval India, a style of Romantics, in the midst of Hindu-Muslim war. Through this poem, Derozio expresses his desire for joining the battle of freedom like Byron. He wanted to join the freedom struggle of his land. The poem narrates a story of a woman who clings to a Golden Vase, a symbol of her lover, who has left her to defend his motherland against the invading Muslims. This theme reminds one of Keats' 'Isabella'. Both the central characters, Isabella and a beloved in 'Isabella' and 'The Golden Vase' respectively, are possessive about their gifts of love. Derozio inspired by Keats's 'Isabella' and also by her pot of basil, portrays the character of a woman with a golden vase to which she clings on. The poem opens with a passionate description how a woman is clinging the vase shows intensity of her passions for her lover:

See, how she hangs upon that golden vase!

As if each flower it holds were a sweet thought...

...Her arm

So white, so delicate, so gently twined

Around the golden neck of that bright vase

Looks as 'twere made of moonlight. (Chaudhari 251)

After the battle is over and possibly won, the lover returns to his beloved in the guise of a minstrel and very romantically sings: 'Were I that vase-forgive the thought! / My bliss would be divine; / And I would bless my golden lot / For that soft arm of thine.' (253) The song over, Derozio romantically sensualizes the end of the poem with a description of a kiss when beloved recognizes her lover: 'Her lip is pressed to his for whom she lives, / Her arm entwines not now the vase's neck, / But the hands that embraced the vase now / taken from the gift, it fondly clings / Like a sweet tendril to the giver.' (253)



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Derozio lived in the era of colonialism where greater upheavals were happening in the name of educational, political and social developments. This was the era of reforms from the perspectives of both colonizer and colonised in the country. Raja Rammohan Ray initiated the social reforms while Derozio, although covertly, sparked nationalistic reforms. During his short life span, Derozio contributed in this herculean task and well expressed his patriotic spirit in his nationalistic sonnets. Derozio writes on themes referring to emotions for ancient India, regret for the present situation and patriotism. Apart from his poems on social concerns, there are poems which speak of his country and countrymen. Mostly, these poems were well influenced by Tom Moore. Also, his exclusively nationalistic sonnets like 'The Harp of India' and 'To India-My Native Land' have been introduced into Indian school textbooks since Independence because of their patriotic fervour.

'The Harp of India' a sonnet of Derozio, symbolises 'Harp' with a mixture of modern and archaic language. He personifies the nation and addresses to its lost glorious past. His other nationalistic sonnets like 'The Broken Harp', 'The Harp of India', 'The Broken Harp', 'Your hand in on the Helm', 'The Harp', 'Sonnet to the Pupils of the Hindu College', 'To India –My Native Land' refer to the individual freedom, lamenting the lost glorious past, colonised states of the country, and reviving renaissance and nationalistic spirits. His 'Sonnet to the Pupils of the Hindu College' is marked by Byronic effusion as in the following lines: 'Expanding like the petals of young flowers / I watch the gentle opening of your minds, / And sweet loosening of the spell that binds / Your intellectual energies and powers.' (291)

With the study of these poems with postcolonial perspective, it may seem to a reader that Derozio consistently, not overtly but covertly, addressed his nationalistic sentiments rejecting and rebelling against the colonisers. His laments in these poems, clearly identifies his longing for India's glorious past, his covert and indirect disapprove of the colonisation and necessity to re-read Derozio and his poems more as anti-colonial.



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