

# British Imperialism and Romantic Imagination: English Poetry in Nineteenth Century Bengal

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Nineteenth century Bengal was a period of great intellectual ferment and social awareness. It was also a period of contradictions. On the one hand it was witness to the reform movements initiated by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Rammohan Roy and on the other there was the opposition to widow remarriage by Radha Kanta Deb, the leader of orthodox society in Calcutta. One of the great debates in the East India Company in the early nineteenth century was between the Orientalists, who argued that the Company should continue its policy of supporting native educational institutions, and the Anglicists, who argued for the establishment of a Western mode of education. By 1818-1819, the British Empire was expanding and hence the need for a single link language was felt by the ruling elite. The Hindu College was started in Calcutta in 1817 at the initiative of a group of Bengalis who wanted instruction not only in their own language but also in English. Indian Clerks and translators were joining administration and knowledge of English was essential for these jobs.

The beginning of English education in Bengal is to be seen in terms of private enterprise. Contemporary records, such as Ramkamal Sen's *A Dictionary of English and Bengali* (1834) and extracts from newspapers collected in two volumes of W. H. Carey's *The Good Old Days of Hon'ble John Company* (1882) refer to schools set up in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century by Drummond, Sherbourne and Halifax among others. There were also schools run by Bengalis. Some of these schools organized recitations, debates, and stage performances of scenes from Shakespeare. Already during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, several plays of Shakespeare were staged in Calcutta. The General Committee of Public Instruction was established in 1823, the year the first grant was made. English schools were set up under the patronage of the Calcutta Diocesan Committee, the Church Missionary Society, London

Missionary Society and most importantly the General Assembly's Institution of the Church of Scotland founded in 1830 by Alexander Duff. English had already replaced Persian as the language of diplomatic correspondence. It was this atmosphere that saw the rise of a literature written in English.

Pyarichand Mitra who wrote under the pen name Tekchand Thakur begins the fourth chapter of his novel, *Alaler Gharer Dulal* with a description of the early days of the new schools that taught English.

When the British first came to Calcutta to carry on trade, the mercantile profession was in the hands of the *baboos* of Sett and Basak families, but there was none in Calcutta who knew the English language. Negotiations of trade with Englishmen used to be conducted by means of gestures. Necessity, however, is the mother of invention, and within a short period the local people began to learn English. When presently the Supreme Court came to be established, the cultivation of English too grew. . . A youngster who, at a wedding function or a dinner party, could rattle forth compound words, became a much-admired cynosure of the gathering.<sup>1</sup>

One of the important ways in which colonialism strove to exercise its control was by means of language. As Gauri Viswanathan points out, "[the] imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England" was the motive for the coming in of the discipline of English in the curriculum in India.<sup>2</sup> The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place.<sup>3</sup> This it does by means of two processes. The first is one of "abrogation or denial of the privilege of 'English'" and involves a "rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication". The other process is that of "appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the center, the process of capturing and remoulding the

language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege.<sup>4</sup> It is this process of appropriation that seems most evident when considering the corpus of poetry written in English in nineteenth century Bengal. The first book of poems in English by an Indian appeared five years before Macaulay's famous minute—*The Shair and Other Poems* by Kasiprasad Ghose. Michael Madhusudhan Dutt's *The Captive Ladie* (1849), *The Dutt Family Album* (1870) and Toru Dutt's *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882) soon followed.

In the nineteenth century there appeared a group of poets in Bengal writing in English. Their poetry was strongly influenced by the works of the British Romantic poets whom they eagerly read and imitated. All the features of what is popularly referred to as the Bengal Renaissance are reflected in the poetry of Derozio, Kasiprasad Ghose, Soshee Chunder Dutt, Madhusudhan Dutt, Govin Chunder Dutt, Hur Chunder Dutt and Greece Chunder Dutt. Nineteenth century poetry written in English in India was imitative. Mimicry played an important role in the definition of the new class of poetry. Bhabha's insight into the nature of mimicry and imitation are of interest here. Mimicry is, according to Bhabha, "the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power." According to Bhabha mimicry is much more than opposition. The hybridities that result from displacement and dislocation challenge notions of authenticity and become forms of subversion and resistance. "The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority."<sup>5</sup>

R. Parthasarathy says that the earlier poets writing in English "from Henry Derozio. . . to Aurobindo Ghose. . . are only of historical interest. They wrote like English poets and, as a result, failed to establish an indigenous tradition of writing in English."<sup>6</sup> While it is true that the poets belonging to the nineteenth century writing in English definitely illustrate a historical and social phenomenon, nevertheless, they are part of a literary tradition, a tradition that allows the entire group writing at this time to be viewed together. These poets write in a language not their mother tongue and what one notices in their poetry is an amalgamation of the east and the west. A critic comments that "the derivative Romantics of *The Bengali Book of English Verse* had no inhibitions at all about writing on Indian themes as much like their English models as possible. . . . For the most part the forms and subject-matter are nineteenth century romantic."<sup>7</sup> As Henry Schwarz writes,

Not only were the poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge printed

and taught in the English-language schools of Calcutta well before English literature had been conceived as a school subject in England, but company administrators like T. B. Macaulay and John Stuart Mill were fervent admirers and practitioners of romantic poetry and philosophy, which informed their visions of a new, rational order in the East and were in turn informed by the potentialities of day-to-day colonial administration. The most powerful element of romantic thought was its elevation of aesthetic experience to the highest achievement of human subjectivity.<sup>8</sup>

Derozio's poetry reveals a strong influence of Romantic poetry, particularly the poetry of Wordsworth and Byron. At the same time his poetry also attempts to expose the social evils of the time. In 1828 was published *The Fakeer of Jungheera, A Metrical Tale and Other Poems*, a long narrative poem exploring the theme of sati. The poem is Derozio's most sustained and ambitious poetical work that deals the romance between the Muslim Fakeer and a Hindu girl. The Hindu Brahmin widow, Nuleeni, is carried from the funeral pyre of her husband by her former lover, the bandit chief Fakeer to his stronghold at Jungheera. They are about to embark on a happy life when the king's men kill the bandit. The poem also has a sub plot about the Legend of Shushan, the legend of King Vikramaditya and the spirit Betaal. The poem reveals an enthusiasm for Orientalist themes in keeping with the general interest in Orientalist subjects witnessed during that time. Derozio's work reveals the influence of Western sources, the poetry of Thomas Campbell, Lord Byron and Thomas Moore as well as Orientalist texts and the translations of William Jones and H.H. Wilson. The subject matter of the poem is interesting in the light of social reforms regarding sati and widow remarriage in India in the nineteenth century. It is, however, important to note that William Bentinck's law (1829) regarding the abolition of sati did not come into being when this poem was written. Derozio's attitude to the practice of sati is evident in the poem.

O! this is but the world's unfeeling way  
To goad the victim that it will soon slay,  
And like a demon 'tis its custom still  
To laugh at sorrow, and then coldly kill.<sup>9</sup>

Derozio supported the movement against *sati* which resulted in its abolition and wrote a poem, "On the Abolition of Satee", in the *India Gazette* (August 8, 1831) celebrating its abolition.

Derozio's favourite poetic form was the sonnet and he was the first Indian poet to use the form. He is also the first Indian poet to bring a note of patriotism in his poetry. Derozio's patriotic poems reveal his pride in India's

glorious past. He describes the splendour of his country and the sufferings under foreign yoke and even expresses a desire to join the freedom struggle. The nationalistic zeal is seen in poems like "To India - My Native Land," "The Harp of India," and "To the Pupils of Hindu College". The sonnets addressed to India passionately proclaim the former glories of the poet's native country, India, while moaning its present state of degradation. The "The Harp of India" refers to a long line of gifted artists who once contributed towards the greater glory of India:

O many a hand more worthy far than mine  
Once thy harmonious chords to sweetness gave<sup>10</sup>

This awareness of ancient achievements follows a description of the present condition of the country.

Thy music was once 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<sup>11</sup>

The poet describes moments of past glory and contrasts that to the country's present state and hopes that India might be able to regain her former position and glory. He goes on to reveal his commitment to his country and muse and promises to take an active role in the restoration and rejuvenation of India.

...but if thy notes divine  
May be by mortal wakened once again,  
Harp of my country, let me strike the strain!<sup>12</sup>

"To India - My Native Land" looks back to the time of India's past glory and contrasts it to the country's its present state.

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?<sup>13</sup>

In the sonnet "To the Pupils of the Hindu College", Derozio speaks of his students, some of whom became important later in literary and social circles in Calcutta,

Expanding like the petals young flowers  
I watch the gentle opening of your minds,  
And the sweet loosening of the spell that binds  
Your intellectual energies and powers<sup>14</sup>

One of the students upon whom Derozio had the strongest influence was Kasiprasad Ghose. Kasiprasad Ghose (1809-1873) wrote poems which were published in local periodicals, the *Literary Review* and the *Calcutta Monthly Magazine*. His collected poems were published in *The Shair, or Minstrel and Other Poems* (1830). He made a serious study of English metre in order to master English poetic form and technique, a fact that he acknowledged. A report in the *Calcutta Gazette* (1828) notes:

English education, among the inhabitants of Bengal, has hitherto had little more than the mere language for its object; a sufficient command of which for conducting the details of official duty, comprehend the utmost ambition of many native students. The spelling Book, a few Reading Exercises, a Grammar, and a dictionary, formed the whole course of their reading, except in a few isolated instances of superior ability and industry; and little more was effected than a qualification as copyist, or accountant. The Hindoo College is intended to compass something more; to teach Bengalee youth to read, and relish, English literature; to store their minds with the facts of history and science, and to enable them to express their conclusions in a clear and polished style; founded upon a comprehensive view of the constitution of society, and the phenomena of nature.<sup>15</sup>

Kasiprasad's formative years were spent at a point of time when the influence of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio as teacher at Hindu College was widespread on the students of the College. Henry Meredith Parker's *The Draught of Immortality* as well as Derozio's poems were published, in 1827 in Calcutta. The same year also saw the publication of Kasiprasad's *The Shair and Other Poems*, the first publication of English poetry by a Bengali. The title page of *The Shair and Other Poems* had a couplet from Byron

Nor mote my shell awake the weary Nine,  
To grace so plain a tale – this lowly lay of mine.<sup>16</sup>

This volume of poems was dedicated to Lord Bentinck, the then Governor General of India. The first canto of the poem, "The Shair, A Poem in Three Cantos" was dedicated to Horace Hayman Wilson. These are important as suggestive of some key features evident in Kasiprasad's works – the influence of the British Romantic poets on his work, the influence of the British that of the Orientalists which often provided the background of his poems.

The opening lines of "The Shair" echo Derozio's sonnet "The Harp of India" which begins

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?<sup>17</sup>

Kasiprasad's poem begins,

Harp of my country! Pride of yore!  
Whose sweetest notes are heard no more!  
O! give me once to touch thy strings,  
Where tuneful sweetness ever clings.<sup>18</sup>

In both the poems the poet's country is symbolized by the harp, an instrument which is very dear to the British Romantics. Both the poems refer to the past when the music from the harp was sweeter since it was played by worthier souls and end with a wish on the part of the poet to revive the glorious traditions of the past. The numerous allusions to Derozio reveal the influence he exerted upon other poets in Calcutta. The sentiment, diction, imagery and metaphor in Derozio and Kasiprasad are almost identical.

"The Shair" tells the story of a Shair, who loved a woman named Armita. The beloved dies and driven to extreme emotions of sorrow, the Shair throws himself off a cliff into the sea. The use of the term Shair for the hero of the poem is explained in the Preface. The poem does not have any other Persian influence and relies on heavy ornamentation in imitation of the English style. There are references to Indian birds, the koil and the bulbul, to lotus blossoms, to Surya, the sun, but the diction is very English.

His descant chaunts the Koil now  
From yonder mountain's gilded brow,  
The rose is blushing sweet to hear  
Her Bulbul's tale with pity's tear.  
Where opening lotus-blossoms gay  
Yield to the kiss of Surya's ray<sup>19</sup>

The entire poem is in couplets and there is an element of artifice. Kasiprasad was able to use English poetic devices as evident in the English tone and form of the lines. He praises his country's greatness in the manner in which English poets eulogized ancient Greece.

Land of the Gods and lofty name;  
Land of the fair and beauty's spell;  
Land of the bards of mighty fame<sup>20</sup>

One section of the *The Shair and Other Poems* is titled "Hindu Festivals", with Kasiprasad describing eleven festivals. The influence of William Jones is evident in the

poems in this section. The poems are prefaced with a sentence explaining the origin of the festival or of the god or goddess they commemorate. "Dasahara" has a sub-heading "Or *Ganga Puja*, a festival in commemoration of the descent of GANGA the river, upon the earth." The poem "Ras Yatra" has the sub title "Or a festival in commemoration of one of the many gambols of KRISHNA, the Indian Apollo, with the milk-women."<sup>21</sup>

The poems in this volume are written in the Romantic style, including three long poems in the first section – "The Haunt of the Muse," "The Lover's Life," and "Hope". There are several smaller poems which have titles like, "Sonnet to the Moon," "Stanzas Written in Spring," "The Setting Sun," or "Evening in May". A poem called "Morning in May" has the following lines where one witnesses the existence of very Eastern motifs with the very Romantic image of the cuckoo bird.

Hear the cuckoo's far, sweet cooing  
From the cage's gloom,  
And he love-lorn Bhramar's wooing<sup>22</sup>

Reviews of Kasiprasad's poetry concentrated on his achievement in writing in a language that was new to him. In Britain several contemporary journals noted the publication of *The Shair and Other Poems*.

The poet who followed Kasiprasad Ghose as the most famous exponent of Indian writing in English in nineteenth century Bengal was Michael Madhusudhan Dutt (1824-1873). Like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who turned to writing in Bengali after his first work, a novel in English, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), Madhusudhan Dutt too began his literary career by writing in English and then turned to Bengali, becoming one of the greatest poets of modern Bengali literature. In an essay, "The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu" (1854), Madhusudhan wrote of his love for the language and literature of the West.

I acknowledge to you, and I need not blush to do so – that I love the language of the Anglo-Saxon. Yes – I love the language – the glorious language – the language of the Anglo-Saxon. My imaginative visions forth before me the language of the Anglo-Saxon in all its radiant beauty; and I feel silenced and abashed.<sup>23</sup>

In a poem composed as a student at Hindu College, "Written at the Hindu College", Madhusudhan echoes the sentiments found in the poem of his teacher, Derozio, "Sonnet to the Pupils of Hindu College". Madhusudhan's poem is a sonnet like Derozio's and expresses the same hopes about the future greatness of the students of the College.

Oh! How my heart exulteth while I see  
 These future flow'rs, to deck my country's brow,  
 Has kindly nurtured in this nursery!<sup>24</sup>

In his poem "Sonnet to the Pupils of the Hindu College", Derozio addresses his students. Madhusudhan Dutt, in this poem, refers to his contemporaries, some of whom became important figures in nineteenth century Bengal, such as Bhudev Mukhopadhyay and Govin Chunder Dutt. Both Derozio and Madhusudhan reveal an awareness of belonging to the Hindu College, the premier institution for the dissemination of English education in India.

Madhusudhan was an Anglophile in his youth and even when his enthusiasm for everything English became moderate later, he never lost his faith in the superiority of Western civilization and culture. While still a student, he contributed to the *Gyanambesan*, the *Bengal Spectator* and the *Literary Gleaner*. He also published poems in a literary magazine, *The Calcutta Literary Gazette* edited by D.L. Richardson who taught English literature at Hindu College. Madhusudhan had a great desire to leave India for England to be a famous poet as is evident in his letters and early poetry. He sent his poems to England to the editors of *Blackwood's Magazine* and *Bentley's Miscellany*. A poem written at a tender age reveals his ambitions and preoccupations.

I sigh for Albion's distant shore,  
 Its valleys green, its mountains high;  
 Tho' friends, relations, I have none  
 In that far clime, yet oh! I sigh  
 To cross the vast Atlantic wave  
 For glory, or a nameless grave!<sup>25</sup>

Madhusudhan's conversion to Christianity was a significant step in the direction of achieving the desire of his youth to reach "Albion's distant shore". On 9<sup>th</sup> February 1843, at the Old Mission Church in Calcutta, Madhusudhan was baptized and given the name Michael. The ceremony was accompanied by a hymn he had composed for the occasion.

Long sunk in Superstition's night,  
 By sin and Satan driven,-  
 I saw not, - cared not for the light  
 That leads the blind to heaven.<sup>26</sup>

Madhusudhan's early poems, like those of Derozio and Kasiprasad Ghose, exhibit an affinity with Romantic poetry. One of the sonnets composed at this time reveal the vision of an idealized Britain as perceived by the poet.

For I have dreamed of climes more bright and free  
 Where virtue dwells and heaven-born liberty  
 Makes even the lowest happy; - where the eye  
 Doth sicken not to see man bend the knee<sup>27</sup>

Two long poems, "The Upsori" and "King Porus" by Madhusudhan reveal a growing interest in Orientalist themes. This interest was a result of the work of the Orientalists in India, the works of William Jones and others.<sup>28</sup> These poems also mark a movement away from the early poetry so reminiscent of the English poetic tradition towards the development of his individual literary sensibility.

Between the years 1849 and 1856, Madhusudhan remained in Madras composing the bulk of his mature English poetry. *The Captive Ladie* was published in 1849 and he contributed regularly to the *Madras Circulator and General Chronicle* and the *Athenaeum* and also edited *Madras Spectator* and the *Hindu Chronicle*. It was for the *Madras Circulator* that he wrote the long poem *The Captive Ladie*. The poem is based on the story of King Prithviraj and his abduction of Samyukta and his subsequent defeat in battle to Muslim invaders. The poem is subtitled "A Fragment of an Indian Tale" and in the Introductory stanzas he introduces the topic of his long poem.

Then come and list thee to the minstrel-lyre  
 And Lay of Eld of this my father-land,  
 When first, as unchain'd demons, breathing fire,  
 Wild, stranger foe-men trod her sunny strand,  
 And Pluckt her brighter gems with rude, unsparing  
 hand.<sup>29</sup>

The poem has two cantos, each of which is preceded by lines from Byron's *The Giaour* and Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*. The Muslims are described as fearful, while the Hindus are shown to be fighting for life and liberty. The battle scenes are described with great vigour and power and the poem has many references to Hindu mythology and to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

Michael Madhusudhan Dutt's 'King Porus- A Legend of Old' has an epigraph from Shakespeare ("We never shall look upon his like again!") and one from Byron ("When shall such hero live again?") and deals with King Porus and his encounter with Alexander.

Like to a lion chain'd,  
 That tho' faint - bleeding - stands in pride -  
 With eyes, where unsubdued  
 Yet flash'd the fire- looks that defied;  
 King Porus boldly went  
 Where 'midst the gay and glittering crowd

Sat god-like Alexander;  
 While 'round, Earth's mightiest monarchs bow'd  
 King Porus was no slave;  
 He stooped not – bent not there his knee, -  
 But stood, as stands an oak,  
 In Himalayan majesty.  
 'How should I treat thee?' ask'd  
 The mighty king of Macedon:  
 'Ev'n as a King', replied  
 In royal pride, Ind's haughty son,  
 The conq'ror pleas'd,  
 Him forth releas'd:  
 Thus India's crown was lost and won.<sup>30</sup>

"Visions of the Past", a verse fragment was published before *The Captive Ladie* in 1848 in the *Madras Circulator*, is replete with Christian themes and imagery and is about a vision which the poet sees in a bower of two divine beings that vanish and reappear. Besides this fragment, Madhusudhan's other English work encompasses a dramatic poem, "Rizia, the Empress of Inde". After his return to Calcutta he translated his Bengali plays *Ratnavali* and *Sermista* and another translation of the first nationalist play in Bengali by Dinabandhu Mitra, *Nil Darpan*. It was in keeping with the spirit of the times that Madhusudhan began to compose literature in Bengali instead of English. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 caused a national unrest against the British rule in India and the subsequent years witnessed the gradual birth of nationalism in Bengal. It is this scenario and personal circumstances that influenced Madhusudhan's decision to write in Bengali.

*The Dutt Family Album* is the first anthology of poems by Indians in English and contains poems by Govin Chunder Dutt, Greece Chunder Dutt, Omesh Chunder Dutt and Hur Chunder Dutt. The poems in *The Dutt Family Album* are modelled on Romantic and Victorian poetry, sometimes with lines from an English poet included as an epigraph. Educated at Hindu College under the supervision of D.L. Richardson the members of the Dutt family wrote on Christian sentiment, nature and Indian history and legend. The strongest influence on these poets was British Romantic poetry. Govin Chunder converted to Christianity, visited England and published *The Dutt Family Album* in 1870.

In his Introduction to an anthology of Indo-English poetry in 1918, T.O. Dunn wrote about *The Dutt Family Album*

The literary merits of the compilation, carefully judged in the light of the special circumstances of its production, are considerable. The quality of the verse, the range and variety of theme, the command of various metrical forms, and the restraint and dignity of the style are everywhere pleasing Indian

history, legend and landscape, the picturesque element of the Christian and the Hindu faith, and such ideas as would attract the oriental in his first encounter with the West, provide the subjects of their verse.<sup>31</sup>

In a poem "A Farewell to Romance", Govin Chunder addresses Romance

Who hath not seen thee, fair one, when the day  
 Urges his courses over the dappled clouds<sup>32</sup>

The echoes of Keats are obvious, "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?"<sup>33</sup>

Govin Chunder's verses also appeared in the *Calcutta Review* (1849). Hur Chunder's poems were published in *Fugitive Pieces* (1851) and *Lotus Leaves: Poems Chiefly on Ancient Indian Subjects* (1871). Greece Chunder's *Cherry Stones* was published in 1881 and his second volume *Cherry Blossoms* in 1887. He also wrote a book of poems called *The Loyal Hours: Poems Welcoming the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Edinburgh on their Advent to India in 1869 and 1875* (1876) which gives an idea of the political inclinations of the family. Shoshee Chunder Dutt's works include *Miscellaneous Verses* (1848), *Stray Leaves: or Essays, Poems and Tales* (1864) and *A Vision of Sumeru and Other Poems* (1878).

The poem 'A Farewell to Romance' reveals the great love and admiration these poets had for Romantic poetry,

The varied melody of Shakespeare's shell,  
 The Doric flute of Milton, or the reed  
 Of 'sage and serious' Spenser ever dear,  
 In breathless silence heard so oft before  
 By thee and me, (thou didst confess the spell);  
 Or what less deep, of late, thou lov'st to hear  
 The strains of Scott that stir the soul indeed.<sup>34</sup>

A special affinity with the poetry of Wordsworth is discernible in many of the poems. Two poems in the *Album* are dedicated to him, 'Wordsworth's Poems' and 'Wordsworth'. The influence of Sir Walter Scott is evident in the historical poems in the *Album*. The beginning of Omesh Chunder Dutt's 'The Chief of Pokurna' reveals the way the poet uses an English idiom to describe an Indian setting,

Within the merry greenwood,  
 At the dawning of the day,  
 Four-and-twenty armed men  
 In silent ambush lay,  
 They wait like couchant leopards,  
 Their eager eyes they strain,  
 And look towards the lonely glade,  
 Towards the distant plain.

The description of the chief of Pokurna is even more revealingly,

A brave gerfalcon on his wrist,  
The bugle on his breast,  
The sunlight gleaming brightly on  
His nodding plume and crest.<sup>35</sup>

The historical poems are chiefly concerned with either Rajput or Mughal history. This interest in history is in keeping with a general interest in Indian history in the nineteenth century, seen in historical novels, plays and poems.<sup>36</sup> This interest is due to the fact that colonial ideology, as Ashis Nandy states, "postulated a clear disjunction between India's past and its present. The civilized India was in the bygone past; now it was dead and 'museumized'".<sup>37</sup>

In the preface to his volume of poems *Lotus Leaves: Poems Chiefly on Ancient Indian Subjects*, Hur Chunder Dutt writes of this interest in history,

We have many historians in India from school-histories up to elaborate treatises, but no work embodying Indian historical incidents and characters and older traditions in a poetical form. Yet India is truly the land of romance and poetry. . . . Turning to its history we find in those gigantic epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata such an inexhaustible mine of the romantic and the poetical, and its later history such stirring incidents, such oriental gorgeousness, such rapid rise and extinction of dynasties, such a marvelous development of the plans of Divine Providence, that neither the poet nor the romancer can be at a loss for subjects to write upon. . . . All that. . . [poets do] is to versify or put into metre certain passages in the history of India arranging them in chronological order, and as metrical compositions exercise a more powerful influence than prose, especially on the young, he trusts his labors will not be altogether without its uses.<sup>38</sup>

The poems written by members of the Dutt family were predominantly derivative in nature and they were influenced by colonial ideology in the usage of myth in their poems. They approached the history of India through the works of historians dealing with remote regions and legends of India. "The Death of Mohammed Ghori," "Jehangir's Lament," "The Flight of Humaon" and "Sunjogta" deal with the history of Delhi while poems like "Tara Bae" and "The Flight of Rana Sangha" deal with legends of Rajasthan.

The influence of Colebrooke, Willima Jones, James Todd, Monstuart Elphinstone, Grant, Duff and William Erskine on this school of poetry is immense. Todd's *Annals* presented Rajasthan in vibrant colours.

The struggles of a brave people for independence during a series of ages, sacrificing whatever was dear to them for the

maintenance of the religion of their forefathers, and sturdily defending to death, and in spite of every temptation, their rights and national liberty, form a picture which it is difficult to contemplate without emotion.<sup>39</sup>

This is very much how the Dutt's depicted history and historical figures in their poetry.

The middle of the nineteenth century witnessed the institutionalization of English education with Orientalism being invoked only in the cause of nationalism. After 1857 and the establishment of the rule of the Crown, the British attitude to India hardened. Together with the spread of English education and western ideas, Indians had also begun to absorb western historiography. By the middle of the nineteenth century, a deep interest in the study of history grew in India with writers like Rajnarayan Bose, Bhudeb Mukherji, Chandra Nath Basu and Bankimchandra Chatterjee using history in the defence of Hinduism. In an essay, Bankimchandra Chatterjee writes that the reason Indians are weak is because of a lack of a sense of unity or national pride and that this is not possible unless Indian history is described and interpreted by Indian historians.

There is no Hindu history. . . . Who will praise our noble qualities if we do not praise them ourselves? . . . . When has the glory of any nation ever been proclaimed by another nation? . . . The Hindus have no such glorious qualities simply because there is no written evidence.<sup>40</sup>

Writings such as these contributed towards creating the nationalist mood that led poets like Hur Chunder Dutt to write poems on historical subjects. Orientalist thought had been dealt a severe blow during the time of Lord Bentinck. As David Kopf notes, that between 1829 and 1835,

. . . the College of Fort William was dismantled, the Asiatic Society experienced grave financial difficulties, the Calcutta Madrassa and Sanscrit College came precariously close to extinction, the Calcutta School and School Book Societies were rendered impotent, Serampore College anglicized its curriculum and lost its attractiveness to Indians, and such Bengali socioreligious reform movements as the Brahma Sabha began their long drift to cultural nationalism.<sup>41</sup>

This is an important development since it enables one to realize that the poetry of the Dutt's was often a reaction to a government policy which sponsored Western education and considered it infinitely superior. The Orientalist period was invoked predominantly in the cause of nationalism. Hur Chunder Dutt's poem "Sonnet: India" reveals this nationalism. The poem begins with the love of the poet for his country, then moves on to a vision of India's past and ends with a hope for a bright future.

Thy days of glory memory recalls,

And castles rise, and towers, and flanking walls,  
And soldiers live, for thee dear land who fell<sup>42</sup>

The frequent reference to the conflict between the Rajputs and the Mughals in the historical poems by the Dutts is a parallel to the situation prevalent between the Indians and the English. The historical poems by the Dutts champion the cause of the weak against the strong and express ideas of freedom from subjugation.

To-day we'll free our country from  
A tyrant's hated reign,  
To-day we'll break, no more to wear,  
Base thralldom's galling chain.<sup>43</sup>

The year 1875 could be said to be the end of Orientalist poetry so prevalent in nineteenth century Bengal. 1876 saw the publication of two works that marked definitive stylistic departures from the earlier school of nineteenth century Indian poetry in English. The first was the publication of Toru Dutt's *A Sheaf Glean'd in French Fields* and the other was the first book of poetry to be published in English outside Bengal, Behramji Malabari's *The Indian Muse in English Garb*. Another interesting development is the publication of poetry written in English by Indians abroad unlike the earlier school of poetry which was predominantly published from Calcutta. Malabari's work was published in Bombay and was followed by Vesuvala C. Nowrosjee's *Courting the Muse* (1879) and M. M. Kunte's *The Rishi* (1890).

The poets writing in Bengal in English in the nineteenth century used the medium of poetry and the English language to express nationalist ideas as well. This school of poetry is the site of an interface between the colonizer and the colonized and is also an example of subversion as the colonized used the colonizer's language to establish a nationalist identity.

## Notes

1. Quoted by Amalendu Bose in "Bengali Writing in English in the Nineteenth Century" in N. K. Sinha, ed., *The History of Bengal: 1757-1905* (Calcutta, University of Calcutta, 1996), p. 514.
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3. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 35.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 86, 88.
6. "Indo-Anglian Attitudes," *TLS*, March 10, 1978, p. 285.
7. David McCutcheon, *Indian Writing in English: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1997), p. 56.
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9. A. Mukhopadhyay, A. Dutta, A. Kumar and S.S. Mukhopadhyay, eds., *Song of the Stormy Petrel: Complete Works of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio*, (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2001), p. 109.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
14. V. K. Gokak, selected and edited, *The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1970), p. 53.
15. *Calcutta Gazette*, Thursday, 17 January 1828.
16. *The Shair and Other Poems*, Scott & Co., Calcutta, 1830, p. i.
17. *Song of the Stormy Petrel: Complete Works of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio*, Progressive Publishers, Calcutta, 2001, p. 11.
18. *The Shair*, p. 1.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.
21. *Ibid.* pp. 125, 128.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
23. "The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu," in Kshetra Gupta, *Madhusudhan Rachanabali*, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1993, p. 638.
24. "Poems", *Madhusudhan Rachanabali*, p. 454.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 438.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 467.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 449.
28. See Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002).
29. *Ibid.*, p. 480.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.
31. *The Bengali Book of English Verse: A Record and an Appreciation* (Calcutta: Jogemaya Prokashani, 1918, rpt. 2004), p. xix.
32. V. K. Gokak, *The Golden Treasury of Indo-English Poetry*, p. 71.
33. John Keats, "Ode to Autumn", in A. R. Weekes, *The Odes* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 64.
34. V. K. Gokak, *The Golden Treasury of Indo-English Poetry*, p. 73.
35. *Ibid.* pp. 79-80.
36. Nishi Pulugurtha, "The Poetry of the Dutts" in Somdatta Mandal, ed., *The Indian Imagination: Colonial and Postcolonial Literature and Culture* (New Delhi: Creative Books, 2007), pp. 185-192.
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39. *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, or the Central and Western Rajpoot States of India* p. xvii.
40. *Bankim Rachanabali*, Vol. II, p. 236.
41. *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 241.
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