

## **'Freedom to the Slave': A Brief Textual Analysis**

Dr. Sudeshna Majumdar  
Assistant Professor of English  
Rampurhat College

### **Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831)**

Henry Derozio the pioneer of Indian English Poetry was deeply influenced by English Romantic poets. He is the first poet of Indo-Portuguese origin to spark the flame of Indian poetry in English. Since his formative period in school and college, he was greatly influenced by literature, philosophy and the ideals of French Revolution. The idea of liberty (freedom), equality and fraternity (brotherhood), the three key aspects of French Revolution could be noticed in poems of Derozio, which were earlier adapted by the English Romantic poets, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron. Derozio's father was an indigo planter and as a young boy Derozio moved to his father's estate at Bhagalpur. The scenic beauty of Bhagalpur appealed to him to a great extent. From 1826 to 1831 Derozio was a legendary teacher at Hindu College, who inspired his Bengali students, the Yong Bengals into freethinking and nationalistic ardour. He inspired his students to write in English about India. Thus he laid foundation of Indian English Poetry. His thoughts initiated an Indian Renaissance in the 19<sup>th</sup> C. Calcutta.

Derozio's works are greatly influenced by the sensuousness and patriotic fervour of the English Romantic poets. He was born in the same year as Tennyson and Darwin. His poems are always set in Indian context and Indian landscape appears in his poems through vivid colours. His short lyrics are fine with beautiful natural description and patriotic feeling. He mostly wrote sonnets and short lyrics in the style of the English Romantics, especially Byron. One of his most important lyrics is 'To the Pupils of the Hindu College'. The early phase of Indian poetry in English was thus marked by an enthusiastic reading of English literature and imitation of English literary forms. Derozio, in spite of being a European by birth, adapted himself within Indian culture. Hence in the early phase of Indian English writing it was not only the English-educated Indians, but also the Europeans who loved India, participated in a cross-cultural dialogue. The poetry they wrote was English in language and form but Indian in theme.

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*Sudeshna Majumdar*  
Teacher-In-Charge  
Rampurhat College  
(Govt. Spons.) 15/12/21

'Freedom to the Slave' is a patriotic lyric. The poem begins with a quotation from the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish poet Thomas Campbell's poem, which Derozio uses as an epigraph to emphasize the patriotic theme of his own poem. If a poet borrows lines from another poet's work and uses it at the beginning of his own poetry to explain the entire theme his poetry, it is known as an epigraph. This epigraph, "And as the slave departs, the Man returns" suggests the co-existence of two personalities (the captive self and the free self) within the same human body. Out of these two selves, as the self of the slave ceases to exist, human being begins to live as a free soul and regains his humanity. When the Slave dies within the heart, the free Man regains its position within human heart. Derozio finds Campbell's lines quite relevant to his own poem. That is why he is using it as an epigraph.

This particular lyric of Derozio is marked by Romantic ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity that French Revolution instilled within English Romanticism. The poem has influences of Byron's thoughts about liberty. It glorifies human dignity. The common man feels very excited and heart throbs in happiness as he knows he is free. The word 'free' is emphasized. The feeling of freedom is explained by Derozio as the 'noblest feeling'. A slave usually kneels down before his master. He is ever submissive. But a person who knows that he is free, he kneels no more and his thoughts are also raised along with the body. Derozio thus suggests the freedom of the mind is required along with the freedom of the body. As he says "he felt himself a man", he refers to Campbell's poem and suggests freedom is a regaining of personality.

The feeling of freedom is reflected in Nature as well. The freedom of natural entities like trees, rivers and birds are compared to the freedom of man. Nature was a symbol of freedom for the English Romantic poets. Derozio too follows these ideals to emphasize the sense of freedom that the slave suddenly feels as he becomes free. The free-flowing air, the wild birds and the free-flowing stream become symbols of freedom for the newly-freed man. The man identifies himself with these free natural entities: the air, the birds and the stream. Like the English Romantic poet Derozio relates nature with freedom.

From lines 17 onwards 'Freedom' is personified and addressed and he talks about patriotic sacrifices that the freedom-fighters make for their motherland. Derozio addresses Freedom as a goddess, whose alter is decorated with the everlasting flame of patriotism. The alter of our heart has also a place for this goddess 'Freedom'. Here we are reminded of Byron's patriotic poems. The patriot fights for this freedom, the patriot's heart bleeds as he sees nobody to be

free. The freedom-fighters, those have broken the chains given by the tyrant, should be glorified. When a person feels that the fellow person is suffering, this particular feeling gives freedom to the slave. The freedom is not always an outer freedom rather it is a mental freedom. At the end of the poem the poet feels gratitude for the generous person, who gives freedom to the slave.

This poem of Derozio is very significant in the context of Indian English poetry because it talks about freedom and bondage, issues that were quite relevant in the colonial India. The expressions like 'alter', 'heaven' are European just as the form of the poem as well, but the content is universal because it talks about the rediscovery of human dignity through the abolishment of slavery.

  
Teacher in-Charge  
Rampurhat College  
(Govt. Spons.)