

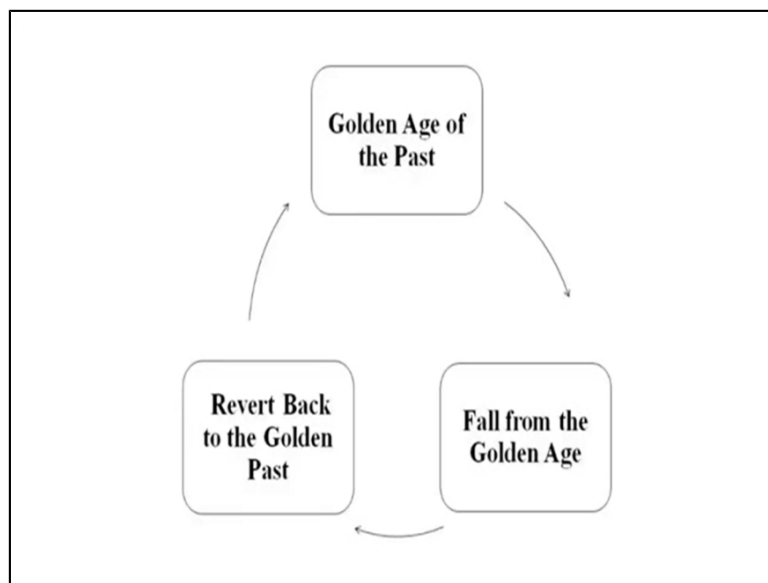
Postcolonial Literature
Prof. Sayan Chattopadhyay
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Lecture No. #10
Sonnets of Henry Derozio

Welcome back, to this series of Lecture, on Postcolonial Literature. Today, we will be continuing with our discussion, on Decolonisation, from the Indian perspective. And, we will be doing so, with special reference to the poetry of, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio. But, before we start exploring the poems of Derozio, let us dwell a little longer on the English educated middle class, which emerged in India during the 19th century, and the Nationalist Discourse, that they forged.

Now, as I have already said in my previous Lecture, that one of the characteristic features of this National Discourse, that the Middle Class came up with, was an underlying cyclical pattern. And, this pattern looks, something like this.

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This is already a known slide. I am using it, from the previous Lecture. And, we can see that, according to this pattern, India, was once a land of high civilisation, which represented its golden age. But, the people of this subcontinent, had subsequently fallen from that superior position, and the golden age, was now lost. So, the present India, therefore represented a kind of a degenerate state of being, which was confirmed by the fact that, Indians had now become a Colonised race, who were subjugated by the Europeans.

Now, the present India, as I said, is an India of decay and degeneration. But, this pattern, which talks about a fall from the golden age, also talks about a regeneration. So, the fall from the golden age of the past, according to this pattern, is to be remedied in the future, which will be marked by a reversion back to the golden age.

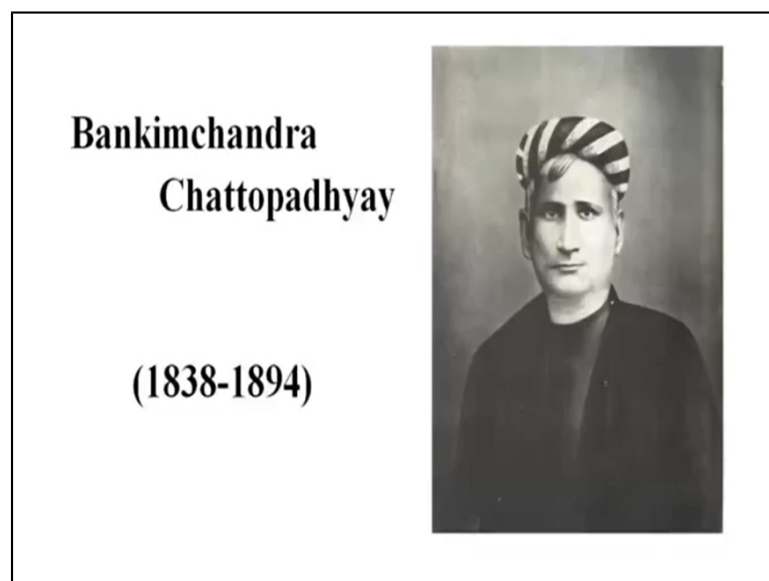
Now, as I have said earlier, if you study the development of the Middle Class Nationalist Discourse, we will observe various differences regarding, say for instance, what constitutes this Indian golden age, when did it come to an end, what are the reasons for its coming to an end, and things like that.

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But, the underlying cyclical pattern, which you can see in this slide, remain the same till, say the Gandhian era of the 20th century.

And, as we shall see today, this cyclical pattern already started emerging, quite early during the 19th century. So, this pattern, can clearly be traced in the Discourse of the middle class, from as far back as the early 19th century, down to the Gandhian era of the 20th century. And, the text, where this cyclical pattern of the Indian Nationalist Discourse is most explicitly evident, is perhaps in the Bengali Novel, Anandamath, written by the 19th century Bengali Novelist, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay.

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Bankimchandra's dates are, 1838 to 1894. And, his career, is typically that of an individual, belonging to the new Indian middle class, that started emerging from the 19th century.

Indeed, Bankim, typical of the middle class, he was also an English educated person. And, was in fact, one of the first students, to graduate from the Calcutta University, which was set up in 1857, along with the Universities of Bombay and Madras, to promote western style education in India.

Bankimchandra served the British Government, first as a Deputy Collector, and then as a Deputy Magistrate. And, near the end of his life, he was awarded by the Colonial Government, with the title of CIE, or the Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire. So, in one sense, Bankimchandra was quite thoroughly integrated as part of the Colonial authority, he was part of the Colonial system itself.

But, this is only one side of his career, which is in fact, almost forgotten today. Today, Bankimchandra is remembered, almost exclusively, as one of the first. And, here I quote, the words of the Historian, Partha Chatterjee, is remembered as, “one of the first Systematic Expounders in India of the Principles of Nationalism”. And indeed, his Novel Anandamath, can easily be regarded, as one of the founding texts of Indian Middle Class Nationalist Discourse.

And, as most of us will know the song Vande Mataram, which is contained in this Novel Anandamath, was inextricably associated with the Middle Class led Nationalist Movement, throughout the 20th century. And, of course, later in independent India, it became the National Song. So, as I was saying, it is in this Novel Anandamath, that we most clearly encountered the cyclical pattern of a glorious past, a fall from it, and a future promise of reverting back to it.

In this Novel, which tells the story of the Sanyasi Rebellion, that erupted in Bengal, during the late 18th century, the Hero Mahindra, is at one point in the Novel, shown three different images of the Mother Goddess by the Sanyasis, to explain to him the reason for which, the Rebellion was organised by them. And, the three different images of Mother Goddess, that Mahindra sees are variously described as, the first one is described as the Mother, as she was.

The second one is described as, the Mother as she is, at present. And, the third one is, a depiction of the Mother, as she will become, or as she will be in the future. And, each of these images, they represent in the Novel, different states of the country India, in past, present, and

future. And, the first, which depicts the Mother Goddess as the resplendent Jagadhatri, perfectly formed and decorated with every ornament, represents the glorious past of India.

The second depicting her as Kali, who has been robbed of everything, represents the state of misery, which the country has fallen into, in the present. And, the third depicting her as Durga, glistening and smiling in the early morning rays, and these are words from the Novel, holds out the promise of a future regeneration, of the ancient glories. And, it is for this future regeneration, that the Sanyasis are apparently working.

Now, according to Bankimchandra, the transformation of the Motherland from the first image, that of the resplendent Jagadhatri, to the second image that of Kali, who has been robbed of everything, was manifested by the lack of independence. And, it was the third image therefore, was an attempt to regain back that resplendent earliest ature, which the Mother enjoyed.

But, an attempt to regain back the state of glory in the future, Bankimchandra's Novel seems to suggest, would require superhuman efforts, by what is referred to as the Santans or the Children of the Motherland. But interestingly, if you read the Novel through, we will realise, that this effort, to relieve the Mother of its present miseries, and to revert her back to the past glories, is not an effort, that is to be automatically directed against the British Colonial rule.

Now, this might sound somewhat counterintuitive to us today, but as a long monologue near the end of the Novel argues, without the help of the Colonial rule, the Hindus, will not be able to regain their earlier glory, which was characterised by a way of life, which is referred to in the Novel as, Sanatana Dharma. Now, here it is important to note that, in Bankimchandra writings, we find a problematic merging of terms like Indian, Hindu, and Bengali.

And, here also in the Novel, there is this very problematic overlapping of these terms. And, when we read Bankimchandra, we need to keep this in mind. Because, the Novelist seems to use these terms, almost as synonymous, though they are evidently not. But, coming back to the monologue, we find the monologue stating this.

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Unless the English rule, it will not be possible for the Eternal Code [*sanatan dharma*] to be reinstated. [...] The true Hindu rule of life is based on knowledge, not on action. And this knowledge is of two kinds — outward and inward. The inward knowledge is the chief part of the Eternal Code, but unless the outward knowledge arises first, the inward cannot arise. [...] For a long time now the outward knowledge has been lost in this land, and so the true Eternal Code has been lost too. [...] The English are very good in the outward knowledge, and they are very good at instructing people. Therefore, we will make the English king.

Anandamath (my translation)

Unless, the English rule, it will not be possible for the eternal code of the Sanatana Dharma, to be reinstated. The true Hindu rule of life is based on knowledge, not on action. And, this knowledge is of two kinds, outward and inward. The inward knowledge is the chief part of the eternal code, Sanatana Dharma. But, unless the outward knowledge arises first, the inward cannot arise. For a long time now, the outward knowledge has been lost in this land, and so the true eternal code has been lost too.

The English are very good in the outward knowledge, and they are very good at instructing people. Therefore, we will make the English king. So, the argument, in this section of the monologue is that, though the subjugation of the Indians/Hindus by a foreign power, is symptomatic of their fall from the golden age, Colonial rule is nevertheless necessary, to regain that position of power.

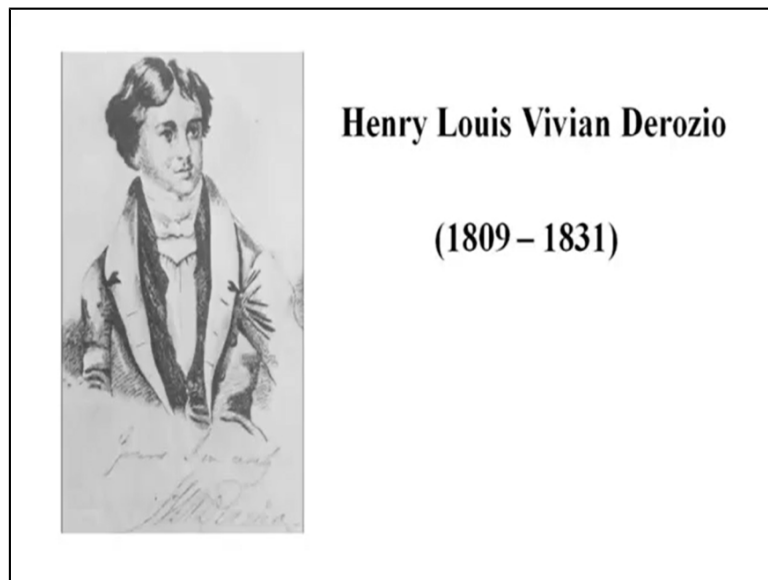
This is because, the western knowledge, that the European Colonisers bring with them, is essential for the re-establishment of the Sanatana Dharma, which according to Bankim, at least, is the true Hindu/Indian way of life. So, the Colonial rule therefore, becomes the very means of overcoming, the state of subjugation. And, the western knowledge system, becomes the very template, on which Bankim's scripts the Discourse of Decolonisation.

Therefore, in this early phase of Nationalist Discourse, as encountered in the works of Bankimchandra for instance, we are finding a unique mixture of respect towards the western civilisation and western knowledge system of the Coloniser, and an attempt to move towards a Decolonised future, when India will be restored to its past glory.

We should remember this, a unique composition of the Nationalist Discourse, because later, when we will study the Gandhian Discourse of the 20th century, when we are doing Raja Rao's Kanthapura, we will see it that, this early respect for the Coloniser civilisation, becomes one of the main targets of Gandhi's attack. Right.

But today, we will not proceed to Gandhi, and the 20th century modification of this Nationalist Discourse. Rather, we are going to move back. We are going to go back, to the early 19th century, and see how the thought patterns, that we have identified in Bankimchandra's Nationalist Discourse, is found in a nascent state, in the poetry of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio.

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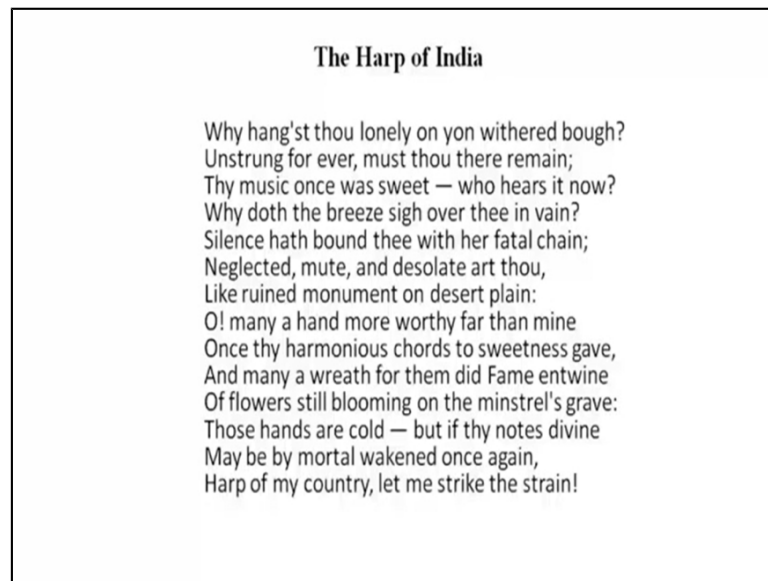


Now, Derozio, whose image, you can see here, was born in 1809, in Calcutta. And, he died at a rather young age, in 1831. But, in spite of this very short lifespan, Derozio had a profound impact on the contemporary Indian society. Indeed, as a popular teacher in the Hindu college of Calcutta, which was incidentally the first major institute of western higher learning, to be set up anywhere in India.

Derozio is credited for introducing a whole generation of Indians, to the merits of English education, or western style education. In that regard, Derozio can be regarded, as one of the founding fathers of the Indian middle class, which started emerging in India, during the 19th century. But today, Derozio is best remembered for his poetry, which represents one of the earliest instances of the Middle Class attempt to forge, a Nationalist Discourse in India.

But, interestingly however, the body of poem, through which Derozio articulated his Nationalist thoughts, borrowed heavily from European literary traditions. And, to understand this malarge of European literary traditions, and Indian Nationalist thought in Derozio's work, let us look at this particular instance of his poetry. And, this particular poetry, is title poem, is titled, The Harp of India.

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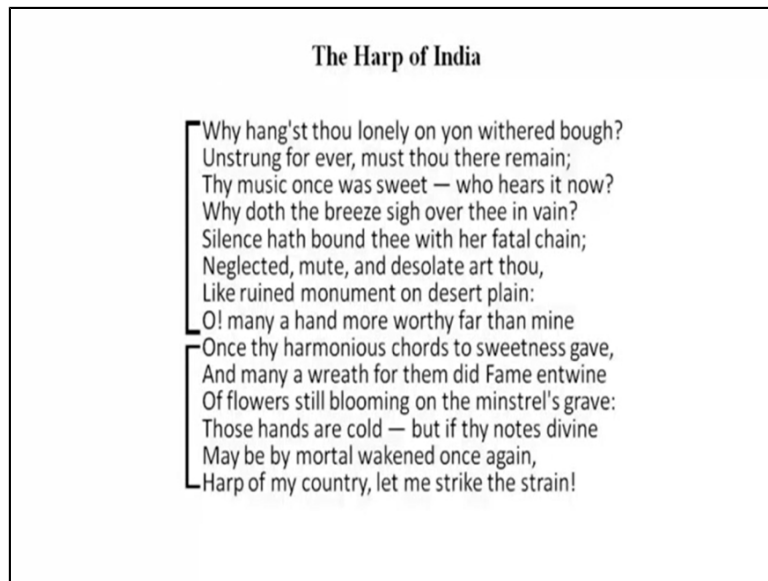
Now, before we go on to the content of these 14 lines, I would like you to note, that the form of the poem, is that of a Sonnet. And, the Sonnet form, is of course well known, as one of the main forms of poetry in European literature. And, it had its origin in Italy, some around the 13th century, but became very popular in England, from the 16th century onwards.

And, which is why, one of the tallest literary figures of Britain, at that point of time, William Shakespeare is also known as a great Sonneteer, who produced more than 150 Sonnets. This Sonnet tradition, which originated in Italy, and then move to England, came to India, via the British literature. And, Derozio was one of one of the first Indian practitioners, of this Sonnet form. So, though the Sonnet tradition was thoroughly indigenised later, by poets like Michael Madhusudan Dutta for instance, who produced Sonnets in Bengali.

When Derozio was writing, during the first decades of the 19th century, Sonnets were still considered primarily, to be a European mode of poetic expression. Now, let us come to the inner dynamics of the Sonnet form. Because, as we will see, it directly influences the

Nationalistic content of the poem, Harp of India. So, the 14 lines of a Sonnet, and Sonnets are usually composed of 14 lines, are usually divided into 2 parts.

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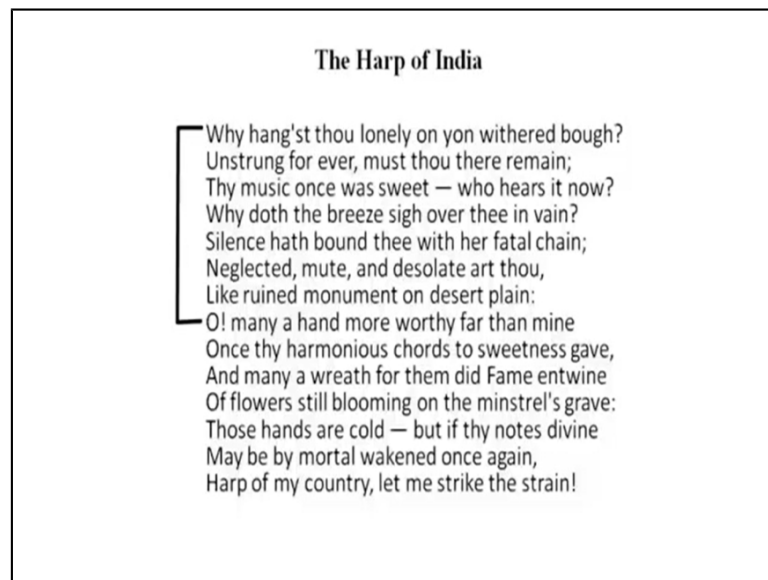
The first 8 lines, form a separate segment by itself, and is referred to as, the Octave. And the last six lines form a separate segment, which is referred to as, Sestet. So, Octave and Sestet. And, Octave and Sestet are separated from one another, by some differences in the rhyme scheme. But, I will not be focusing on, the rhyme difference, in today's Lecture. What I am going to focus on, is the difference in the thought pattern, which separates the Octave and the Sestet.

So, whatever actually, whatever thought is put forward, in the first 8 lines of a traditional Sonnet, whatever thought is put forward in the Octave, is reversed in the Sestet. A very different thought, a contradictory thought, is put forward in the Sestet. And, this change within the Octave and Sestet, this reversal is technically referred to as, the Volta. V O L T A. Now, so this Octave Sestet separated by a Volta, was how the Sonnet was divided in the conventional Italian form.

But, when it came to England, we see a slight change in the position of the Volta. So, for instance, in many of Shakespeare's Sonnets, we notice that the Volta, rather than occurring at the beginning of the Sestet, is delayed till the very last 2 lines of the poem, where the central thought put forward by the first 12 lines, are reversed.

And, when you focus on Derozio's Harp of India, it is important to keep in mind, these 2 possible positions of the Volta. Because, as I will show, Derozio applies the Volta, in both these places. So, and he does that, in order to thematically divide the poem, into 3 segments, rather than 2. So, we will discuss this, when we come to the content. And, in fact, let us come to the content, right now.

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If you read the first 8 lines of this poem, The Harp of India, you will see Derozio is using a broken harp, as a metaphoric representation of India. So, the first 8 lines, it starts from, why hang'st thou lonely on yon withered bough, and it continues, till here. So, in these first 8 lines, we see that, Derozio is talking about a broken harp, which is used as a metaphorical representation of the land of India. And, he is lamenting about, its present state of decay.

The Harp, whose music was once so sweet, has now fallen into disrepair. And, as the poem says, "Silence hath bound thee with her fatal chain". Now, please note that, throughout this section of the poem, Derozio uses present tense, which signifies that this pitiable silence, is representative of the present condition of the Harp, and by extension of India, as a whole.

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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!

Now, if you compare this, to the first four lines of the Sestet, which starts with here, once thy harmonious chords to sweeteners gave, and which continues till here, those hands are cold, you will see that here, the poem predominantly uses the past tense. And, it speaks of the glory, that was associated with The Harp/India, of the past. So, the Volta, that separates the Octave from the Sestet, reverses the pitiable condition of the present, by introducing us, to how the Harp was, in the golden past.

But, if you note the last 2 lines, or rather I should say, the last 2 1/2 lines, because it starts from these words, but if thy notes divine, which actually occurs, in line number 12. We will see that here, Derozio introduces another Volta, and he introduces another temporal schema. So, here the poem is speaking about the future, in which the poet will try and restore the heart, and by breaking its silence, make it sing again.

It is this recovery and reversion back to the golden age, that is indicated by the action stated in the last line, Harp of my country, let me strike the strain. And, therefore, break the chains of silence, which has kept it under bondage and subjugation. So, you will see, there is a cyclical pattern of the golden past, followed by a fall, and a present state of decay, giving way to a future course of action, which will help revert back to the golden past, is already identifiable in this poem, by Derozio.

And, the cyclical pattern, which was to become so prominent in the National Discourse of Bankimchandra for instance, later in the 19th century, is found repeated, in a number of Sonnets by Derozio. For instance, if you place, Derozio's poem, To India My Native Land, next to his, The Harp of India, we will find the same cyclical pattern, in that Sonnet also.

But, what is also important to note, especially with respect to the Harp of India, is the use of a western template, to articulate Indian Nationalist thought. This, we have identified in the writings of Bankimchandra. But here, we see it foreshadowed in the poem of Derozio, where the western form of a Sonnet is used as a vehicle to present, what might be regarded as a Proto-Nationalist Discourse.

In the next Lecture, we will see, how this form of National Discourse, which was initiated by Derozio, and which finally flourished in the writings of Bankimchandra, during in the late 19th century, is transformed by M K Gandhi. And, how this transformation wrote by Gandhi, find its way in the Novel of Raja Rao, titled Kanthapura. We will do that, in the next Lecture. Thank you.