REFLECTIONS

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Chapter - VI

REFLECTIONS

Beneath the words our absentee masters have given us, there is an undermining silence. It saps our nerve. And beneath that silence, there is a raw welter of cadence that trembles and strains towards words and that makes the silence a blessing because it shushes easy speech. That cadence is home . . .

Dennis Lee

Looking back, almost two centuries later, we seem to have travelled a long way from those days of our early poets, from the period when the term "English" was envisioned as encircled with a virgin halo by our ancestors. "Far from enforcing the cultural centrality of its historical homeland, the language has proved to be a generous and accommodating traveller. It has been grafted on to different cultures, adjusted to local conditions, mutated and mongrelized. . . . the development of multiple literary and spoken Englishes illustrates the fecundity of post-colonial adaptation. It is a process which can also be termed cultural boomeranging or switchback, where the once-colonized take the artefacts of the former master and make them their own" (Boehmer,
The dust seems to have now settled down over the stormy actions and reactions of our pioneers of English learning. We appear to have gained a certain degree of complacency in the acceptance of our presence today which at the same time "is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the 'present', for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current controversial shiftiness of the prefix 'post' : post modernism, post colonialism, post feminism . . . " (Bhabha, 1).

The period when the British colonialists came to Bengal, the socially and culturally decadent state into which the society in Bengal had in this period degraded, the relentless hold of religion and superstitious beliefs on the society by the hegemony of the upper class over the suppressed, lower class, the effectual emergence of a new middle-class which equipped itself to oppose the extremities of orthodoxy and its dogmas by favouring atheism were just some of the factors which proved momentuous for the change that was to set in Bengal during the early years of nineteenth century.

Any attempt to overthrow an entrenched and unquestioned mode of social or religious practice naturally sets up a tumult of reactions. Thus while one section of the society took to atheism and to shocking practices bordering on the extreme, the orthodox section reconfirmed its hold on its own related beliefs and superstitions. It was thus consequential that English as a medium of instruction and as a literature reached Bengal when a particular
class was fast losing faith in its religion and its principles as a result of which, this class, especially its younger generation, became sensitive and susceptible to change.

The class-structure and the ensuing divide between the classes, the emergence of a new middle-class, the discoveries and developments in the academic and journalistic fields were different factors which coalesced together to make this class of the society look upon the English language as a superior entity, worth accepting and learning. As examples to emulate, this class had the literature and philosophy of the Romantic age of England which was offered by the colonialists as the ideal model. Along with this, there were several translations and writings on Indian themes written by the colonial writers like Sir William Jones who translated Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* and H.H. Wilson who translated the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharatha*.

The colonised society assimilated these writings and literature. Their inspiration to write originated in a new literature, the Indian Writing in English, a literature written on Indian subjects in the newly-learnt imperial tongue of the colonialists. One can perceive this only in the backdrop of the cultural ambivalence which envisaged a constant conflict in the dual allegiances of the colonized towards the colonizer and the native.

Narrowing down from the huge corpus of Indian literature in English to a study of the Indian poetry in English
brings one again to the early years of nineteenth century when this
genre truly began, the period ranging from 1817 to the 1840s, a
period which chronicled several epoch-making events like the
opening of the Hindu College, the publication of Roy's *Defence of
Hinduism*, the abolition of sati, the functioning of Duff's school
General Assembly, and of course Macaulay's Minutes.

The beginners of the Indian poetry in English, represented by Ghose, Derozio, Toru Dutt and Michael Madhusudan Dutt had a definite poetic vision -- a vision of a
reconstructed India, uniformly balanced by her rich tradition and
culture on the one hand and the advantage of modernist philosophy
on the other. The poets undertook the mission of socially
rejuvenating their nation, of restoring back to the society the
richness of the Indian spirit as perceived in the ideals of Indian
mythology and Indian epics.

Thus, transforming this social mission to poetry, the
poets naturally wrote on native themes, more precisely on
mythological subjects. "The first Hindu poet to write in English",
Ghose chose to versify on eleven Hindu festivals.

When critically or objectively viewed, these poems of
Ghose give the impression of being very superfluous and redundant
narrations where the power, the vigour, the vibrancy and splendour
of the festivals fail to emerge anywhere in the verses. In the
evolution and development of Indian poetry in English, Ghose
represents the "silencing and marginalizing of the post colonial voice by the imperial centre" (Ashcroft, 83) in his absolute acceptance of the superior English tongue, in his dutiful adherence to the principles of poetry as represented by the prevalent English poets like Byron.

But when viewed from a different angle, while his verses, thus lacked power, the themes he chose, the festivals he selected to write upon, reveal a significance to the period in which he wrote. 'Dasahara' represents the victory of good over evil, 'Durga Puja' hails the defeat of the demon Mahisasura at the hands of Durga, 'Janmasthami' heralds the birth of Krishna which signifies the end of the tyrannical Kamsa, 'Sri Panchami' is a celebration of learning and knowledge, 'Lakshmi Puja' honours fortune and wealth. Ghose sought to use the mythological symbols of good and evil in his poetical representations of gods and demons. He used the very myth itself of the right always winning over the wrong, of light destroying darkness, of knowledge clearing the mists of ignorance. Ghose's poems on Hindu Festivals thus emerge as celebrations echoing a promise of such victories to once again be restored to the society, thus establishing the poet's patriotic identity.

The poetry of this era also happens to be the first Indian verses in English written under a colonial power. These were the first records of the experience of a colonized society, the first poems which addressed to posterity the trials and tribulations of an entire generation, which portrayed the positive and the
negative dimensions of a colonized nation. The very concept of enshrining a native theme in an alien language reveals the spiritual dilemma of these poets who had to compromise between the East and the West.

Toru Dutt and Madhusudan Dutt give two excellent parallel studies from this angle, for both the poets experienced independently, the phased impact of colonialism in their lives, in their handling of the different languages and in their individual style of writing. Both the poets experienced the pangs of dislocation brought about by a change of place and a greater change of religion. Toru Dutt felt an instinctive association with the French ideal of liberty which motivated her towards her initial works of translations of French poems. Madhusudan Dutt experienced a similar attraction towards the West and the Western ideals of life and literature and a spurning of the subjected race of Indian community which in turn made him bring out a spate of English poems on subjects considered fashionable then. Both the poets had their basic Indianness suppressed during this phase.

In Toru Dutt, her latent Indian spirit and the influence of Indian philosophy surfaced prior to her return to India and actually brought about her return to her country. Her thirst for Sanskrit, her longing for knowledge of the local myth and lore reflect an acknowledgement of her country by her Self. The Ancient Ballads appears as a manifestation of this identification.
Primarily the *Ancient Ballads* is a contemporary reinterpretation of the mythological tales culled from Indian heritage. This revolutionizing of these eternal characters serves to reinstate the values represented by the mythological characters, values of liberty, progress, duty, love and obedience back in the society. They hope to remove the evils of casteism and untouchability from the society. The *Ancient Ballads* is the poet's answer and solution to the deterioration in the social values that was present during the period. The contemporary problems of the society concerning caste, untouchability, oppression of the lower classes and victimisation of women through child-marriage and bride-burning are dealt with in a very sensitive and pertinent style by the poet through a narration of the mythological ballads. The *Ancient Ballads* thus creates a modern awareness of the native myths by linking them to the social and cultural issues of the era. The work reveals the affinity of the poet for the native culture despite her Western outlook and education. In some of the poems like 'Sita' and 'Savitri', the feminist in the poet becomes very apparent. These poems reveal a strong feminist element which in turn arises as a direct outcome of the poet's own Western, independent outlook, the European education, her modern social background which could never withstand suppression or submissiveness at any level. Poems like 'Sonnet Lotus' and 'Our Casuarina Tree', reveal the struggle between the poet's Indian inheritance and her Western ideals. The strain of ambivalence arising out of their bilingual, bicultural backgrounds is present in all post colonial writers. Hence poems like 'Sonnet Lotus' and 'Our
Casuarina Tree', which very sensitively describe the complex struggle within the poet, become very significant.

Coming to the poetry of Madhusudan Dutt, a definite pattern of return to native themes and native mythology is manifested in the phase of the poetry following the initial phase which witnessed a total imitation of Westernism in the style and to some extent in the contents too. There was a distinct change in this adherence through a conscious introduction of the native content and style into poetry. This poetry revealed a return to the Bengali language from the English language, a recession of English poetry and an intimate understanding of the intrinsic worth of Sanskrit literature. By his unique representation of the good old scriptures, by his fresh focus on religion and by his creation of a new style of poetry in the epic form, a new style of song in the sonnet and a trend breaking rhyme-pattern in the blank verse, his poetry reached an ultimate acceptance of his self with his soil and his culture.

In Madhusudan's poetry too, one can witness the use of mythological characters and events, the utilization of the myths of good and evil to present a fresh, a renewed view of one of the oldest epics of the country, the Ramayana. Through Meghnadbad-Kavya, the poet changes the trend of the society and attempts to alter certain set notions and ideals of the society regarding the Indian myths and deities. The epic Meghnadbad-Kavya treats the episode of the killing of Meghnad, the valiant son of Ravana in a contemporary manner. The poem shatters our concept of placing
the good and the bad, the positive and the negative within water-tight compartments. The possibility of the presence of good in the bad, the positive in the negative, the plus in the minus is presented through this poem. This juxtaposing of values was the poetic expression of the upside-down belief in ideals prevalent in the society then.

The poem shifts the society's perception of Ravana and Meghnad from the demon king and his son to two primary human beings with human emotions. By raising the images of these two characters from their trampled, blackened, denounced levels to a higher plane of humanity and respectability, the poet questions the decadence of the society and reveals the possibility, the definite presence of the positive in all the ranks of the community. *Meghnadbad-Kavya* is the poet's attempt to bridge the rift in the society. The masculinity, the superiority, the glorification of Ravana and Meghnad and the emasculation, the inferiority, the unmanliness of Rama as portrayed in the poem denotes the rise of the new class in society, the fight of this class against the mediocrity of the society, against the conservatism of the practices indulged in by the society. The ideological shift of the poem is an image of a parallel shift in the ideology of the society, the change in the values which the class-structure of the society had hitherto sworn by and which it was perforce to change. Thus ultimately the poem which forms the ground for conflicting ideas, and the crisis resulting out of this, echoes a similar state of conflict in the ideas and thoughts of the poet, in the tension between the East and West.
occurring within the poet, which remains a permanent mark given by colonialism, and which remains unresolved to a certain extent.

Derozio was a class unto himself, who defied the very scar of a mixed racial generation by his redoubled patriotism, by his radical efforts for freedom of thought, by his endeavour to guide an entire generation of students towards the road to liberation, a liberation affecting all strata of life. Though the Young Bengal movement attracted a lot of criticism, it succeeded in serving the purpose of bringing the cultural demoralization of the society to a standstill and turning the society towards an ascent of liberty through the new learning.

Derozio, though a Eurasian by birth, preferred and chose to be identified and recognized as an Indian. He regarded India as his motherland and was the first poet to express concern for his country by his poems. He was the first poet to write on nationalism, on the past glory of his country, on the nationalistic thinking that resulted in the Young Bengal movement.

At another level, his poetry, though typically Indian in content, imagery and spirit was also a poetry persistently reflecting the marginalisation brought about by his Eurasian background, his Western upbringing and attitudes. The native themes of his poems revolved around the ideals of love, death and hope. But simultaneously a sense of insecurity lurked within most of his poems, an element indicating the oppressive nature of a subjugated
existence, under a colonial power. His poems on freedom, freedom for the nation, freedom for the muse, freedom from life are a projection of the intense pangs for liberty experienced by an entire generation living in colonial suppression. Derozio's poems are an externalisation of the conflicting forces at play in the psyche of the poet. His poems evince a dialectical confrontation between the positive concepts of hope, love, freedom and the progress of life and its negative dimensions in despair, suppression and death. This crisis of principles, of marginality was apparent in every turn of the poetic career of Derozio.

An increasing range of development emerges in the poetry of these poets beginning with the poetry of Ghose, leading to Derozio's and culminating in the poetry of Toru Dutt and Madhusudan Dutt, a paradigm of the varying levels of synthesis of the Eastern and Western elements in their poetry, the degrees of changes in their differing attitudes and approaches to the changing socio-cultural scenario of the age.

To imitate, to vouchsafe for the ideals of one's peers with perhaps a refinement, an improvement, a polishing of the rough edges of the pioneering works is the course of art, the course of nature. This has been the course taken by Indian poetry in English too. The early stage of this poetry as seen in the verse of these poets is a project constructing India, socially and culturally. The ideological motivation with which they built India, the ideological constraints within which they had to work, the social
movements of the period as seen in Young Bengal, the efforts of these movements to bring about social reforms all point towards the poets' fascination for their own country. This is why they opposed obsolete social customs, this is why they fought for Westernization, this is why they took up the task of modernising India.

The poets' confrontation with colonial attitudes and their belief in the Western line of thought merge with their inherent native tradition varyingly in rising degrees from the first poet to the later poets. Ghosh's elementary efforts in versification, Derozio's poems on patriotism and nature, Toru Dutt's re-evaluation of Indian mythology, Madhusudan's reinterpretation of Indian tradition bear witness to this task. The "centring of margins" as seen in this poetry is actually a representation of the poets' experiences of their own different scales of alienation. The very enterprise of writing on India in English was an act of subversion. The tension between an English form and Indian material actually began with these poets.

The impact of colonialism is revealed in their poetry, in the very evolution and development of poetry from the phase of sheer imitation to the phase where the stamp of one's nationality, one's Indianness emerges in the lines of their poetry. It is colonialism with its various factors which enabled these poets to identify themselves with India. It is this synthesis of the two cultures, colonial and native, that enabled these poets to successfully handle the current social problems and cultural issues,
which made them, through the medium of their poetry, succeed in bringing those issues to the society, in enlightening the merits and demerits of these issues to the society. These poets utilized their poetry and the myths of their country for the social and cultural progress of their society. By a contemporary reinterpretation of the age-old myths in their poetry, they achieved the ultimate modernization of their heritage, their culture. This modernization of the ancient was the most significant result, the most remarkable outcome of the synthesis of the East with the West in these poets, an achievement despite the large and hitherto untackled unexperienced odds of alienation and marginalization and the ambivalence issuing out of such odds. The social enterprise of this first generation of Indian poets in English is seen thus balanced in their poetical enterprise.