Umo Rao “Writing in colonial space: A critical evaluation of the early nineteenth century Indian poetry in English” Thesis. Institute of English and Foreign languages, University of Calicut, 1999
Chapter - II

GHOSE : A REFORMATORY REFRAIN

You can translate a word by a word, but behind the word is an idea, the thing which the word denotes, and this idea you cannot translate, if it does not exist among the people in whose language you are translating...

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee

Colonialism had reached a crossroad where the colonialists were perforce to take stock of their situation in India, a vulnerable one with tensions and clashes between the East India Company, the English Parliament and the missionaries building up to a climax. It became necessary to construct a parallel pillar of support in the cultural facet of the society which would strengthen their central political position. Apparently in answer to the clamour of the society itself for an English education, the colonialists saw in this a solution to their own crises.

The "necessity" for English learning was very deviously built up by the colonialists at the grassroot level, which called for an uprooting of the power of Sanskrit literature. The colonialists systematically worked towards the "cultural demoralization" of the colonized society. As J.M. Blaut puts it:
Non-Europeans . . . were seen as psychically undeveloped, as more or less childlike. But, given the psychic unity of mankind, non-Europeans could of course be brought to adulthood, to rationality, to modernity, through a set of learning experiences, mainly colonial. *(The Colonizer's Model 96)*

The early steps towards this achievement were, unbelievably, taken by the English translators themselves like Sir William Jones who had translated into English the play *Sakuntala* by Kalidasa and H.H. Wilson who had translated the epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In the words of Bankim Chandra, "...These pundits of Europe and America...attempt to construct historical theories out of ancient Sanskrit texts, but they cannot accept that the subject and powerless people of India were ever civilised, or that this civilisation dates from very ancient times" *(Nationalist 60)*. Sweeping statements against these age-old epics and plays were made by the colonialists, aiming to shake the confidence and the trust of the society in these scriptures. Sanskrit which was the basic, ideological institution of the society was thus exploited in a covert manner by the rulers. James Stuart Mill in his *History of British India* wrote:

... These fictions are not only more extravagant and unnatural, less correspondent with the physical and moral law of the universe, but are less
ingenious, more meritorious, and have less of anything that can engage the affection, awaken sympathy, or excite admiration, reverence or terror, than the poems of any other even the rudest people with whom our knowledge of the globe has yet brought us acquainted... (Devy, Amnesia 25)

Thus in one callous stroke, Mill attempted to crack the ancient and sacred edifice on which the society was built. The prejudiced views of the colonialists and their assertions that Sanskrit literature was replete with horrors, immoralities, obscenities and exaggerations, succeeded in hitting the dart in the eye of the society. The society was subject to the more superior Western culture. In their perspective, the people considered themselves inferior in ways more than one to the better developed and advanced West. Since the beginning of colonization, they had developed a complex of being second-hand and second-class. They looked up at their conquerors and built a larger-than-life halo of superiority around the latter. In a very calculated and underhand fashion, the colonialists had created an absolutely false and unreal picture of comparison between the literatures of the two countries. A desire was implanted within the colonized to strive to imitate the colonialists. Such a ploy made our society very readily join the colonialists in denouncing our traditional literature.

Kashiprasad Ghose was an essential part of this system -- the system of colonization. His poetry represents the
initial waves of the Western learning in the literary field, in the
genre of poetry, Devy says:

There is no point in merely running down the
Indian tendency to imitate the West. Even the
most original of the twentieth century thinkers: Sri
Aurobindo, M.N. Roy and Mahatma Gandhi could
not escape the impact of Western thought. Cultural
forms and intellectual institutions do keep
changing continuously and no post colonial society
can claim to have come unscathed out of the
colonial period. The colonial past cannot just be
wished away. (Amnesia 4)

In tracing the development of Indian English poetry,
we could demarcate the evolution of Indian English poetry into
three stages - imitation, Indianization and individualisation as
pointed out by V.N. Bhushan and Dr. Iyengar (Kotoky, 14). The
poetry of Ghose belongs to the first stage - that of imitation. His
verses, as the one given below evinces are replete with echoes of the
English Romantic poets, maybe reflecting the poet's latent desire to
be one among them.

Or-when his daily course had run,
And ceased to shine the golden sun;
Her robe of darkness wore the night;
The stars emitted sparkling light;
The moon sailed like a silver bark,
Along the ocean vast and dark,
All round were hushed below, above;
The night-wind sighed for flowret's love,
And strove in whispering tone to gain
Their odours sweet and pass amain:-
Then would the Shair also string,
His vocal Vin and thus would sing!

- 'The Shair'

In the last line of the above extract, note how Ghose even goes to the extent of giving an Anglicised twang to the native "Veena" making the instrument "Vin" in the process, probably anticipating a better response thus from his English colonizer. In the very first canto of the poem "The Shair" the poet in a foot note gives the meaning of the "vin" thus: "The current name of the Indian lute, and an abbreviation of the Sanskrit term Vina". The poet's abbreviating of this Indian term, his attempt to Anglicise a native word reflects his accommodative endeavour for the benefit of the colonizer. The poet seems more concerned in exhibiting his newly-acquired proficiency in an alien language, causing him to digress constantly and get carried away by his own verse. Speaking on cultural amnesia, Devy explains:

The colonizing force is seen in the role of a parent hated and feared and imitated by the colonized culture which starts perceiving itself as a 'child'
who fears its own impotency and fantasizes about the productive power of the 'parent'. The intimidated child then engages itself in acts to win the approval of the parent to enable itself to define its own new identity. This is where history ceases to be history and becomes an extended spectrum of fantasy and amnesia . . . (Amnesia 52-53)

This phase prompted our poets to bring out a spate of poetry suffused with echoes of the English Romantic poets like Byron, Keats and Shelley. Their works were portrayals of native characters clad in foreign garb - a miserable attempt to view the local theme from the ruler's eye and versify accordingly. Hence the works turned out to be shallow copies of Romantic poets of England.

Yet if my scanty skill can make
One note, however faint, awake,
My weak endeavour will not be
In vain; - 'tis all I wish from thee.

Unskilled, I strive to soar on wings
Of various, wild imaginings,
Although my every nerve I strain,
Yet find my labour end in vain;
My feeble limbs can scarcely keep
My flight unskilled through airy deep,
In the above extract of Ghose's introductory verses preceding 'The Shair', one finds the poet very diffident in his maiden venture of versifying in English. A perusal of this one poem itself makes very explicit the fact that Ghose is struggling throughout his verses to describe the beauty of his land, the many faces of her climate and the game of fate. The poet seems to be taking an extraordinary effort to share all this and more with someone not very familiar with this land, namely his English master. The poem alternately exudes tones of hope and despair, of joy and sorrow. The inner struggle undergone by the poet in handling the challenging task of relating a Shair's melancholic and romantic tale in a new language, the positive note of success in the venture coupled with the negativity of doubt finds expression in the lines of the poem, as seen in the following lines:

The clouds of care were driven away
And sweet contentment's cheerful ray
Beamed forth and full revived his life,
   Where many a lovely flower of hope,
   That promised future joys did ope,
Secure of further, woeful strife
As if his life's sad winter past
And spring her genial influence cast.

The following extract with its accompanying footnote expresses the poet's wish to make his poem acceptable and
agreeable to his superior masters for the sake of which he puts in elaborative explanations. The poet's allusions to Indian "poets" but European "bards", readily acknowledging the superiority of the latter is notable.

The purling streamlet makes a song,
As through the vale it glides along,
The regal swans* majestic skim
The waves with glittering sunbeams trim

*The swans are here put for the Rajahansas, a superior species of the gander to whom Indian poets have made the like allusions which European bards make to the swan. (The Shair 6).

Ghose belonged to a class of the budding literateurs of Bengal. For him the very fact that he wrote in English, successfully in his standards, was due recognition. Versification in English was by itself an ambitious enough project. Further, the English teachers had imposed their own style of control over the undue development of the unwary poet. Childlike innonence could be reformed into maturity through education and introduction to Western civilization; childish rebellion required strict control and authoritarian rule (Pennycook, 60). By giving him only books written in English and by English writers on English themes, all native sources of influence were barred entry into the minds of the
poet. Obviously the poet was mentally attuned to conform to the English. Moreover, approval from the English guides was the end-all of all poetic attempts. The poet did not write with an Indian audience in mind but with the English audience, the English masters in mind. Subconsciously the poet was aware of being regarded as an absurdity or an abnormality if he ever strove to change his theme or style.

Ghose says in his Preface to *The Shair And Other Poems* that his inspiration to write on Hindu Festivals came from a friend who desired that the poet write on a national theme. The subject of Hindu Festivals proved to be the poet's limit on nationalism as is obvious from his own statement: ". . . having then no other Indian subject at hand . . . but the Hindu Festivals . . ." The necessity to be more innovative, to select a theme more nationalistic was not felt.

Though declared to be unoriginal in the choice of themes, to be fair to the poet, one should appreciate the style adopted by the poet. The English poetry which the poet read, absorbed and was influenced by was that written by the Romantic English poets like Byron and Keats. At a deeper level there was the influence of none other than the period in which Ghose wrote. In Bengal, this was an era when the socio-political and cultural dimensions of the society were undergoing a facelift. There was a concentrated attempt in all spheres to come out of the earlier decadence. This effort for revival, the desire for a renaissance
touched upon all areas of activity, art and literature. The romantic style which the poet adopted for his verses was a natural outcome of the spirit of the age. The Romantic style of English poets was, for Ghose, the best adoptable style.

The opening poem 'The Shair' is a narration of the tragic fate of a Shair and his beloved. The depiction of this tragic tale of love is prominently Keatsian.

Ah! why a sport should frail man be,
To blasts of grief on misery's sea?
Ah! why like wounded birds will fall
At once our hopes and joys and all
Such things as make our life appear
So bright, so lovely, and so dear?
Why gloomy care should like a cloud
The fairest scene of life enshroud?
And why alas! should happiness
Be ever blended with distress?
But so it is; like calm and strife,
Pleasure and pain succeed in life.
As flowers and thorns connected grow
In human life so bliss and woe!

The poet's philosophical tone in the above lines, the delineation of the blending of happiness with distress, pleasure with pain reveals an underlying note of ambivalence of the era. It is arguable that a poet like Ghose, who represents just the rudiments,
the utmost primitive or raw elements of Indian poetry in English, could not be even remotely effectual enough to represent or relate such a complex phenomenon. But this note of duality was very deeply ingrained in the spirit of this period, so much so that maybe even without a writer's, a poet's awareness of it, it was but natural that it should find its way into the art, the poetry of the period.

Ghose's poem tells the story of the Shair and his beloved, Armita, who roamed through hills and dales in the ecstasy of their love and the sheer poetry of the Shair's songs, till one day destiny took Armita away, leaving the Shair alone in the world. The Shair, who was wild with grief and unable to bear the sorrow of the loss any further, one day left the world by plunging into the depths of the ocean.

The poet excessively indulges in depicting the pastoral beauty of the plains and the valleys through which the Shair travelled, the portrayal of day and night, of the Shair's songs, of his love for Armita, of the beauty of Armita, of the verdant nature around, of the Shair's sorrow and of destiny's blow.

In "The Indianness of Indian poetry in English", M.K.Naik suggests the application of certain touchstones to identify the genuineness of Indian poetry, irrespective of the medium, which would ultimately make the poetry stand the test of time. . . . only an art firmly rooted in a time and a place can, by the virtue of it's being so rooted, become true to all times and all climes (Studies 70-71). A writer's consciousness of his identity and his
culture should form the pivot round which his book rotates. The most obvious - - and the most elementary - - form this awareness can take is the use of an Indian setting or the choice of specifically Indian subject matter (Naik, 72). Applying this test to Ghose one could conclude that Ghose's poems possess this awareness in its most primary, most raw form. The poet evinces just the early glimmers of such a consciousness. Hence, the poet's subject matter may be Indian but there is a definite lack of depth in his treatment of the native subjects. The only tool that Ghose is familiar with in handling his themes is the narrative style, which he utilises to describe at length the nature, the love, the lover and the philosophy.

The following verse gives an example of the poet's repetitive style of narration:

Now o'er the wood in mid-day heaven,
His radiant care the sun has driven,
The glorious Lord of Day displays
In dazzling glow his golden rays
With withering heads and downward cast,
The flowers and leaves are drooping fast;
As if in reverence nature bends
Before the glories bright,
Which red, resplendent Surya lends
To gild this world with light.
The charm of silence all around
The bush, the brake, the mead hath bound,
The birds are mute, the wind is dead,
And heat intense around is shed;
Such is the glow my native clime
Gives forth to all in mid-day time.

Ghose has written eleven poems on some of the festivals of the Hindus. These poems are the earliest descriptions in English verse-form of the "Dasahara" "a festival in commemoration of the descent of GANGA the river, upon the earth" (The Shair 125); the "Ras Yatra" depicting "the many gambols of KRISHNA, the Indian Apollo, with the milk-women" (The Shair 128); "Kartik Puja", "a festival in honour of KARTIKEYA, the Divine commander-in-chief of the celestial army" (The Shair 131); "Janmashtami", "a festival in commemoration of the birth of KRISHNA" (The Shair 134); "Sri Panchami", "a festival in honour of Saraswati, the goddess of learning" (The Shair 138); "Durga Puja", "a festival in honour of Durga the consort of Siva" (The Shair 142); "Dola Yatra", celebrating "the swinging of KRISHNA in the cradle while a child" (The Shair 145); "Kojagara Purnima", "a fesitval in honour of LAKSHMI, the goddess of plenty, love and beauty" (The Shair 148); "Jhulana Yatra", "in commemoration of one of the numerous gambols of KRISHNA with the milk-women" (The Shair 152);"Kali Puja", a festival in honour of KALI or SYAMA, an emanation from the head of DURGA and the goddess of war (The Shair 155); "Akshaya Tritiya", "a day held
extremely sacred for its being the anniversary of Creation and the commencement of the *Satya yuga* or golden age* (The Shair* 158). The choice of the festivals reflects the Bengali spirit, the Indianness of the poet.

The titles of these poems belie the contents which are more or less redundant. The spirit of the chosen Hindu festivals, the festive nature of the occasions fail to enter the poems. The liveliness, the colour, the vibrancy, the life of these festivals do not even remotely touch the poems. The poems thus get reduced to superfluously descriptive narrations. The only striking aspect of this section of Ghose's poems is in the selection of the festivals which are intensely Bengali, especially the Karthik Puja, Sri Panchami, Dola Yatra, Kojagara Purnima, Kali Puja and of course the Durga Puja. Herein the quality of Indianness of the poet gets registered even though in a very faint, very peripheral manner.

The final section of Minor Poems finds the poet dabbling in sonnets to the moon, in such archaic poems like 'Evening in May' written during a shower and 'Morning in May' written after a shower and 'Lines to a Star' written during a storm among many other similar poems. In all the poems in the final section of the book, we note the poet's obsession with the sun and the moon which he is never tired of depicting in their various hues.
His poem 'Song of the Boatmen to Ganga' seems a refreshing change with the tone of the poem going in tune with the rhythmic progress of the moving boat, though of course the Ganga etched by Ghose in the poem hardly matches the image of the lofty Ganga-Mata that resides in the minds of Indians.

Gold river! gold river! how bright is the beam,
That lightens and crimsons thy soft flowing stream;
Whose waters beneath make a musical clashing,
Whose waves as they burst in their brightness are flashing,

Gold river! gold river! the moon will soon grace
The hall of the stars with her light-shedding face;
The wandering planets will over thee throng
And seraphs will waken their music and song.
Gold river! gold river! our brief course is done,
And safe in the city our home we have won!
And as to the bright sun now dropped from our view,
So Ganga! we bid thee a cheerful adieu!

M.K.Naik states that the "quality of Indianness is ultimately seen in the ethos of the best Indian poetry in English . . . The acid test of this ethos is 'could only an Indian have written this?' (Studies 74). Here one would definitely admit that Ghose's poems, being mostly redundant, fail this test. But in all fairness the poet must be rightly given his due in certain fundamental
aspects. Firstly, he succeeded in learning an alien language at an early stage of the post colonial development of the society in Bengal. Secondly, he made the rudimentary efforts in versifying in such a language and succeeded in getting his poems published.

It is also noteworthy that this volume of poems was written in a crucial period of the two years from March 1828 to August 1830— a period when the Hindu College was in her ascendancy, with her students making their presence felt in the society through their fiery debates; a period when Derozio's influence reigned supreme on a sizeable section of the student community. This was also the crucial moment when the entire society as well as the British colonialists were caught in a vicious cycle of conflicts in the religious, social and literary sectors of the society. Under such a multidimensional canopy, the period witnessed the renewed spirit of nationalism. It might be argued that at such a vital point of time when Ghose could have sought fiery themes to focus his poems on, themes having at least a remote bearing on the national spirit, he settled for ballads and sonnets on love and nature and poems on Hindu festivals.

But the colonial straitjacket in which he nurtured his nascent poetic spirit and composed his poems should not be forgotten. The very fact that Ghose chose for his poems native, Indian themes, however alien or Western his form and style might have been, reveals the latent spirit of nationalism, the quality of
Indianness within him. In "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature", Jan Mohammed says, "Even though the native is negated by the projection of the inverted image, his presence as an absence can never be cancelled" (Critical Inquiry 67). The conflict issuing out of the poetic attempt to describe the native, the Indian theme in a foreign form to win the acclaim of the foreign superiors emanates in a literary crossfire. What is the native? Who is the native? Is it the native as he is, as he appears or does the true native lurk behind the exterior, a certain unsaid character or nature which the native himself desperately tries to cover with the help of his newly-attained veneer? It is this basic nature which even in its absence can never be ruled out. It also offers us a glimpse of the ambivalence, the tension of dichotomy in the poet's mind, which was a natural outcome of the period. It was probably this ambivalence that resulted in a volume of poems which, though very much a vociferous imitation of the West was also a whisper of the native essence by a poet whose sincere though crude beginnings gave way for a better, more refined poetry to come.