

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 10

Dr. Sayan Chattopadhyay, IIT Kanpur

Welcome back to the series of lecture on Postcolonial literature. Today we are going to continue our discussion on decolonisation from the Indian perspective and we will do so with special reference to the poems of Henry Vivian Derozio. But before we start exploring the poems, let us dwell a little longer on the English educated Indian middle class that emerged during the nineteenth century and the nationalist discourse that they forged. As I have already mentioned in my previous lecture, one of the most striking feature of this discourse was an underlying cyclical pattern. According to this pattern, India was once a land of high civilization but the people of this subcontinent had subsequently fallen from that superior position and the golden age was now lost. The present India therefore represented a kind of degenerate state of being which was confirmed by the fact that they were now a colonised race who were subjugated by the Europeans. However, the pattern also holds out a promise of regeneration. The fall from the golden age of the past is to be remedied in the future which will be marked by a reversion back to the golden age.

As I have said earlier, if we study the development of the middle class nationalist discourse we will observe various differences regarding what constitutes this golden age, when did it come to an end and the ways in which Indians should try and revert back to the golden past but the underlying cyclical pattern remained the same till the Gandhian era in the twentieth century and as we shall see today, this cyclical pattern already started emerging quite early during the nineteenth century.

Bankim

The text where this underlying pattern of the Indian nationalist discourse is most explicitly evident is perhaps the novel *Anandamath* written by the nineteenth century Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. His dates are 1838 to 1894 and his career is typically that of an individual belonging to the new Indian middle-class that emerged during the nineteenth century. Bankimchandra received an English education and was indeed one of the first students to graduate from the University of Calcutta which was established 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 was rewarded 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.

But this is only one side of his career which is in fact almost forgotten today. Bankimchandra is more remembered now, to quote the words of historian Partha Chatterjee, as “one of the first systematic expounders in India of the principles of nationalism”. Indeed, his novel *Anandamath* can easily be regarded as one of the founding texts of Indian middleclass nationalist discourse and as most of us will know, the song Vande Mataram contained in this novel was inextricably associated with the middle class led anticolonial movement throughout the twentieth century.

So as I was saying, it is in this novel, *Anandamath*, that we most clearly encounter the cyclical pattern of a glorious golden past, a fall from it, and a future promise of reverting back to it. In the novel which tells the story of the sanyasi rebellion that erupted in Bengal during the late eighteenth century, the hero Mahendra is shown three different images of the mother goddess by the sanyasis to explain to him the reason for which the rebellion was being organised. The three different images of mother goddess that Mahendra sees are described as "Mother-as-she-

was", "Mother-as-she-is" and "Mother-as-she-will-be" — each representing different states of the country in past, present and future. The first which depicts the goddess as the resplendent Jagatdhatri, "perfectly formed and decorated with every ornament", represents the glorious past, the second depicting her as Kali, who "has been robbed of everything", represents the state of misery which the country has fallen into at present, and the third depicting her as Durga, "glistening and smiling in the early morning rays", holds out the promise of a future regeneration of the ancient glories and it is for this future regeneration that the sanyasis were apparently working.

According to Bankimchandra the transformation of the mother land from the first image to the second was manifested by the lack of independence and to an attempt to regain back the state of glory in the future would require superhuman efforts by what the novel calls the "*santans*" or literally the children of the mother land. But interestingly, if we read the novel through, we will realise that this effort is not automatically to be directed against the British colonial rule. This might sound somewhat counter-intuitive 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 glorious way of life characterised by what is called the "Sanatan Dharma". Now here it is important to note that in Bankimchandra's writing we find a problematic merging of terms like Indian, Hindu and Bengali. The novelist used these three terms almost as synonymous in his writings and we should take note of this peculiarity.

Anyway, coming back to the monologue we find it state that:

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. (229)

So the argument here is that though the subjugation of Indians/Hindus by a foreign power is symptomatic of their fall from the golden age, colonial rule is necessary to regain that position of power. This is because the Western knowledge, that the European colonizers bring with them, is essential for the reestablishment of the sanatan dharma which, according to Bankim at least, is the true Hindu/Indian way of life.

The colonial rule therefore becomes the very means of overcoming the state of subjugation, and the Western knowledge system becomes the template on which Bankim scripts the discourse of decolonization. Therefore, in this early phase of nationalist discourse as encountered in the works of Bankimchandra we find a unique mixture of respect towards the Western civilization and Western knowledge system of the colonizer and an attempt to move towards a decolonized future when India will be restored to its past glory. We should remember this unique composition of the early nationalist discourse because later, when we will study the Gandhian discourse of the twentieth century with reference to Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura*, we will see that this early respect for the colonizer's civilization becomes one of the main targets of Gandhi's attack.

But today we will not proceed to Gandhi and the twentieth century modification of the middle-class nationalist discourse, but rather we are going to go back to the early nineteenth century and see how the thought patterns that we have identified in Bankim Chandra's nationalist discourse is found in a nascent state in the poetry of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio.

Derozio and Sonnet

Derozio was born in 1809 in Calcutta and died at a rather young age in 1831. But in spite of his short life span, 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 institute of Western style higher learning set up in India, Derozio is credited for introducing a whole generation of Indians to the merits of English 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 nineteenth 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. Interestingly however, the body of poem through which Derozio articulated his nationalist thoughts, borrowed heavily from the European literary traditions. And to understand this melange of European literary tradition and Indian nationalist thought in Derozio's work let us look at this particular instance of his poetry titled "Harp of India".

Now before we go on to the content of these fourteen lines, I would like you to note that the form of the poem is that of a sonnet. The sonnet form is one of the main forms of poetry in European literature and had its origin in Italy somewhere around the thirteenth century and became quite popular in England in the sixteenth century, and therefore we see that William Shakespeare who was active during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century was also an accomplished sonneteer. This sonnet tradition passed on to India during the nineteenth century via British literature and Derozio was one of its first Indian practitioners. So though the sonnet tradition was later thoroughly indigenised by poets like Michael Madhusudan Dutt for instance, when Derozio was writing during the first decades of the nineteenth 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 fourteen lines of a sonnet traditionally is divided into two sections. The first section is constituted of the first eight lines and is called the octave and the second section is constituted of the last six lines and is called the sestet. Now these two sections are usually divided by different rhyming patterns but also they were divided by the thought that they put forward. So whatever will be stated in the octave, in a traditional sonnet, there will be a reversal of that thought in the sestet and this reversal is traditionally known as the Volta.

This 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 in many of Shakespeare's sonnets for instance we notice that the Volta rather than occurring at the beginning of the sestet is delayed till the very last two lines where the central thought put forward by the first 12 lines are reversed. When we focus on Derozio's "*Harp of India*" it is important to keep in mind these two possible positions of the Volta because, as I will show, Derozio applies Volta in both these places thereby dividing the poem thematically into three rather than into two sections.

So coming to the content now, if you read the first eight lines you will see Derozio is using a broken harp as a metaphoric representation of India, and 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". Please note that throughout this section the poem 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.

Now if you compare this to the first four lines of the sestet starting with "Once thy harmonious chords" and ending with "Those hands are cold", you will see that here the poem predominantly uses the past tense and speaks of the glory that was associated with the harp/India in 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 its golden past.

But if you note the last two lines or rather the last two and a half lines because it starts from the words “but if thy note divine” in line number 12 you will see that there is another Volta accompanied by another change in the temporal schema. Here the poem is speaking about the future in which the poet will again try and restore the harp, 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”.

So you see that the cyclical pattern of a 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 this cyclical pattern which was to become so prominent in the nationalist discourse of Bankimchandra is found repeated in a number of sonnets by Derozio. So for instance if you place Derozio’s poem “To India – My Native Land” next to his Harp of India you will find the same pattern working in that sonnet too. What is also important to note 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 this poem by Derozio where the Western form of 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 nationalist discourse which was initiated by Derozio and which finally flourished in the writings of Bankimchandra is transformed by MK Gandhi, and how that transformation found its literary manifestation in Raja Rao’s novel *Kanthapura*. Thank you.