

Exploring the Homoerotic Implications of Natural Images in Henry Derozio's Selected Poems

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Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31) is considered to be the first Indian English poet. He was born to an English mother and Indo-Portuguese father and was brought up in Calcutta and studied in Dr. Drummond's Academy. He excelled in literature and philosophy which influenced his poetic career greatly. From 1826 to 1831 he taught in Hindu College. This period is generally considered to be the richest in Derozio's short span of life. Hindu College provided the space for Derozio to discuss the major issues of his times with his pupils.

Here, his fearless spirit of inquiry, his passion for ideas, his reformistic idealism and his romantic enthusiasm fired the imagination of many a student. Under his leadership, a debating club ('The Academic Association') and a magazine (*The Parthenon*) were started to discuss all subjects under the sun, including Hindu religious practices, the rights of women and political issues. (Naik 23)

Hindu college experiences also provided the glimpses of Indian-English educational system at the time of Derozio and how he used this time for the betterment of his students. He inspired his students to read the masterpieces of literature, philosophical and political writings such as Homer, David Hume, and Thomas Paine. The free discussion and debating sessions of the students, under the guidance of Derozio, were one of the great charms of Hindu College in those days. These sessions continued long after the college hours. The reason, rationality, logic, the ability to discuss, and with a free spirit are the virtues which Derozio wanted to implant in his students. As Mukherji points out, "Hindu College boys adopted two percepts. The first: 'He who will not reason is a bigot, he who cannot reason is a fool, and he who does not reason is a slave.' The second: 'Cast off your prejudices, and be free in your thought and actions. Break down everything old and rear in its stead what is new.'" (55).

Whereas his new teaching methods enlightened the students greatly, his unorthodox and iconoclastic ways infuriated the Hindu College management on the one hand and general Hindu

public, missionaries, and colonial regime on the other. So he was expelled from the Hindu College. Naik talked about one of the major charges on which Derozio got fired, “The mounting pressure of hostile public opinions finally compelled the College authorities to dismiss Derozio from service in 1831 on the charge of corrupting the minds of youth” (23).

Now what are the ways through which Derozio was corrupting the minds of his pupils who mostly belonged to the upper-class Brahmin families? Apart from other reasons like – over-emphasis upon western logic or reason and cultural values, criticism of Hindu religious ways and superstitions, rejection of unnecessary rituals and customs – there is one striking reason, “One wonders if the real reason for Derozio’s dismissal was a touch of homophobia in the college’s governing body on account of the exclusive male discussion groups over which he presided in his Entally home” (Mukherji 56).

It revealed the socio-political power structure of the Hindus and the colonizers which try to overpower all other differences and diversities. This particular aspect of Derozio’s life (his ambiguous sexuality) is one of the striking and important concerns for the present research paper.

For the remaining few months of his life, Derozio devoted himself for writing and editing the journals like *The East Indian* and “contributed extensively to *The India Gazette*, *The Calcutta Literary Gazette*, *The Indian Magazine*, *The Calcutta Magazine*, *The Bengal Journal*, *The Enquirer*, and *The Hesperus*” (Mukherji 57). In these writings Derozio expressed his views radically and fervently on social, political, and public matters. He wrote about the Eurasians dwelling in India and their rights and conditions (because they neither can identify themselves with Indians nor with the English):

Though but a lad of one-and-twenty, he had taken a leading part in one of the greatest and most momentous movements in Indian society, from which his name can never be dissociated; and he had already made his mark as a leader of thought in India, as a philosopher of unusual acuteness, as a poet distinguished by wonderful command of language, fertility of imagination, and that wide sympathy with Nature which marks the highest intellects, and as the advocate of his own class. (Edwards 142)

Further point to note is his view regarding English / colonial legal system in India. He criticized it strongly because of its being unfavorable for the India people. His moral views, anti-

suttee stand, and reformist zeal are important aspects of his personality, “He was a reformist and welcomed the law forbidding suttee in a poem expressing his joy that ‘the priestly tyrant’s cruel charm is broken’” (Das Gupta E). Derozio was indeed a person of public opinions which he duly expresses in his prose and poetic writings. He was a brilliant lecturer, lively poet, polemical journalist, and enthusiastic reformer.

Derozio was highly influenced by Romantic and Neo-classical traditions of English poetry, especially by Moore, Keats, and Byron. Apart from this he can also be regarded as an early Victorian poet, not only because of his being contemporary to the Victorians or his life-span and time-period but due to his poetic attributes. His Romantic, Neo-classical, and Victorian tendencies can be seen in two volumes of his poetry volumes – *Poems* (1827) and *The Fakeer of Jungheera: A Metrical Tale and Other Poems* (1828).

First and foremost Derozio is considered to be a national and patriotic poet who sings the glory, richness, and the prosperity of his native land –India. He uses the romantic conception of nature as an ideal space or place where the anxieties of the day-to-day life can be forgotten and a healthy peacefulness can be enjoyed which can nourish the damaged self of human beings:

His poems have a light lyrical touch and the influence of the younger Romantics can be seen everywhere in his work – in its sensuousness, its detailed natural observation, its patriotic fervor. (Mukherji 57).

This depiction, observation, and idealization of natural scenes are remarkable features of romantic poetry. Derozio follows this tendency fairly well but mainly in the context of his native land –the natural world of Indian subcontinent. His affinity with the Indian landscapes, rivers, and other natural world can be seen in the following lines from his poem “August in Evening” where he sings the praise of Ganges in these lines:

Roll on, fair Ganges! –What a noble stream!
And on its bosom the last, lingering beam
Of the red, setting sun serenely lies,
Smiling, like Hope’s last ray –and then it dies! (1-4)

The other important romantic traits of the poet and his poetry are adherence to free spirit, freedom of the mind and soul, liberty to go far beyond the constraints of real world, and to take the flight of fancy or imagination. This freedom sometimes appears to be lunatic, crazy, and whimsical, as in his poem “Poetry” – “Sweet madness! –when the youthful brain is seized / With

that delicious phrenzy which it loves, / It raving reels, to very rapture pleased,” (1-3). Same sort of frenzy can be seen in the poetry of Blake, Keats, Byron, and Shelley. The reasons for such madness can be many like the growing pressure of moral degradation, the industrial revolution, class division, impact of French revolution, and personal problems.

Derozio also tries to portray the Byronic hero who goes against the ways of the world and defies all conventions as in *The Fakeer of Jungeera*. The revolutionary spirit of Shelley can also be seen in the same and others of his poems. This revolutionary spirit of Derozio and his poetry is also the outcome of his adherence to Romantic school of English poetry. Romantic poets are highly influenced by French revolution due to which their writings acquire a revolutionary zeal. The tragic life experiences, the melancholic spirit, and a deep sadness or grief are other romantic attributes of Derozio’s poetry. This melancholic spirit originates from his alienated, isolated, mixed-race / hybrid identity, and the precarious condition of his fellow Eurasians in India as well as the identity-crisis which occurs due to his in-between status among two different cultures.

It is the note of sadness that everywhere predominates, and as one reads his beautiful lines and impassioned words one feels the deep-rooted melancholy of the writer and the presentiment that he himself had of the inevitableness of his impending fate. (Bradley-Brit i-ii)

But Derozio makes a choice to join the Indians instead of the British. He sings the glory of Indian natural world, culture, society, and myths, “Thy music once was sweet, -who hears it now?” (“The Harp of India” 3). He knows that the Eurasians and the Indians are facing the same troubles at the hands of the colonial oppressions who are the root cause of their problem.

The Neo-classical tone of his poetry and prose can be seen in the adherence to reason, rationality, clarity, decorum, and logical inquiry of different fields or subjects. His poems which satirize the shallowness of Western as well as Indian cultural values are equally Neo-classical in pointing out the weaknesses of the both. Similarly the blend of lyrical and narrative poetic traditions is the Victorian feature of Derozio’s poetry. Overall impression of Derozio’s poetry is that of a romantic free spirit which tries to overcome all the racial, social, cultural differences so that a better unity, harmony, and wholeness can be enjoyed among differences and diversity. In a way he advocates unity among diversity.

Apart from these, Derozio is considered the first national bard. He makes India the subject of his poems. His patriotic feelings can be seen in many of his poems where he sings the

charms of freedom and liberty. That's how he advocates the idea of a national spirit. He further inspires other poets to use Indian subjects, themes, concerns, and issues for their poetry. His views on India can be seen in these lines from the poem "To India –My Native Land":

My country! In thy day of glory past
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,
And worshipped as a diet thou wast. (1-3)

Derozio, indeed, is the first Indian English national poet. His nationalistic impulse can be seen in the use of Indian imagery, myths, folklore, social-cultural trends in his poetry. His poetry is characterized by its romantic, satirical, narrative, emotive, nationalistic, and social traits. He is also the first to bring close the West and the East, the English and the Native, the Occident and the Orient. His young age, non-conformist and iconoclastic ways, his revolutionary spirit are some of the reason due to which he is neglected till now.

Henry Derozio, apart from being the first Indian English poet, can also be entitled as the first queer English poet from India. His simultaneous representation of natural world and the queer desire can be seen in some of his remarkable poems as "Love's First Feelings", "Song", "Morning After a Storm", "Sonnet to the Pupils of the Hindu College", "A Walk by Moonlight", and many others. His nature poems are the direct influence of Romantic poets whom he follows closely.

Henceforth, his concept of Nature is not confined to a particular thought but it is a combination of ordinary, spiritual, supernatural, mystical, transcendental and intellectual presentations of Romantic poets. Identifying such traces or influences of English Romanticism on Derozio or on his concept of Nature does not, however, minimize the excellence, the richness and the greatness of Derozio as a gifted poet. (Chavda 86)

"Love's First Feelings" is a poem where Derozio acquires the guise of a female persona or speaks through her and talks about her / his love for the male lover. The next point to note about the poem is the contrast between the effects of the coldness (winter season) and the warmness (summer season) and how this natural imagery is used to represent the relationship of the lovers. The radiance on the face of the lover warms each nerve of the poet-persona. And (s)he worships the lover just like the sun-god is worshipped by the human beings. The sunrays provide life, vigour, and energy to the human and non-human beings without which life is not

possible on earth. In the similar way the lover provides the warmth for the poet-persona to live his life smoothly, without which the persona feels lifeless. As:

I shivered, and my hand grew cold,
As if my mortal hour were told;
I would it had been! but his smile,
Like sunshine beaming, cheered the while;
And when I saw he smiled on me,
My heart knelt in idolatory! (5-10)

Here the affectionate behaviour of the lover puts the same effects upon the poet-persona as the warmth of the sunrays have upon every living being. One's warmth is exaggerated and stimulated by the other. The poet salutes such glory of the lover as well as the sun when he sings, "My heart knelt in idolatry!" (10).

But the trouble comes when the lover turns away from the poet-persona. Actually the entire poem is about the coldness of the lover towards his beloved / loved one. The charm and beauty of the poet-persona wither away due to the coldness of the lover. Here he sings this grief which emerges due to the coldness of the lover for the beloved and equalizes it to the winter season and its effects on the flowers and other vegetation:

That I had faded like a flower,
A flower which heaven's soft tears had cherished
But when the wild blast came, had perished.
'Twill not be so with me; for grief
Will strew the flowret leaf by leaf. (24-29)

The life-giver sun can turn cold and perish the entire biosphere including the humans. The poem is as much about the living beings as it is about the lover-beloved relationship. Although the natural imagery is used to depict the relationship of the lovers, but the imagery stands for itself when the harmful effects of cold weather are expressed in the poem. The persona feels as if he is withering just like the flowers in the winter season "leaf by leaf". Then what can be the solution to such precarious conditions? Who can save the persona as well as the rest of the living beings? At the very end of the poem the poet gives answer to these questions when he sings that the warmth or vigour provided by the lover to him and by the sun to all human and non-human living beings is the source of life which can save the withering charm and beauty of

the world. The ruler of the destiny of life is sun just like the ruler of the destiny of the poet-persona is his / her lover, “The only one who was to be / The ruler of my destiny.” (45-46).

The next poem “Song” is quite similar to “Love’s First Feelings”. Here Derozio looks upon and praises the paired / coupled non-human living beings and feels despair because he himself is single or alone. Again in this poem he takes the guise of a female persona who longs for a male partner. While observing the cheerful behaviour of the deer-couple Derozio admires the beauty of nature. As:

Together o’er the hills they bound,
Together o’er the fields,
Together share each spotless joy
That bounteous nature yields. (5-8)

In the second part of the poem Derozio pays attention to the dove-couple. So here is the movement from animals to birds, from land to sky, from solid ground to fluid vacuum of the air. The glory of the dove is the glory of a free spirit who hovers in the sky along with her mate. The intimacy of the couple provides abundant solace to each other. Although he starts this part by praising the paired dove but slides towards his own despair because of being alone while all other living beings are enjoying the physical and spiritual intimacy. He sings his grief in the following lines:

The timid roe hath e’en a haunt,
The turtle-dove a nest;
And each a mate to share her fate,
But I’ve nor love nor rest. (25-28)

In order to escape his grief-ridden state of being single the poet wishes, in the third part of the poem, to be something other than a human being like the “zephyr light”, “an elfin spirit”, or “a little flower”. In these forms he might be able to get a mate or enjoy physical intimacy with his / her partner, “If e’en I were a little flower / To bloom upon his breast,” (45-46). Throughout the poem the contrast between human and non-human beings is visible. Whereas the non-human beings are free to choose their mate and enjoy the relationship, human beings are much sophisticated in this regard. That’s why they suffer through despair, sorrow, and grief.

The longing for the physical contact and for a companion is common for both the human and non-human beings. Their desires are similar to a great extent. That is the reason that human

beings are often called social animals, “The play of likeness and difference in the relationship of humans and animals in general may be analysed in terms of the distinction of metonymy and metaphor” (Garrard 153). Another aspect of the poem is the anthropomorphism where human emotions are projected upon and through the animals and birds. The feelings of hope and fear are expressed by the poet-persona him / herself because (s)he has parted from her / his lover. But the happy and jubilant domestic life is represented by the animal and bird couples.

One more point to know about these two poems is that in both the poems the male poet is talking through a female persona especially in the first one. Disguising one in some other gender and then performing that identity is one of the most striking concern of Queer Theory. Here the performative function of gender identity becomes quite clear. But before that it also destabilizes the distinction between male and female genders. Being a male and speaking through a female persona, by expressing her desires, puts Derozio’s own desires in a complex frame.

The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an “internal” feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gesture. (Butler xv)

Why does Derozio do that? Why does he take the form of a female persona? Are his desires similar to that of a female? Is he looking for a male partner? These questions make the scene even more troublesome but at the same time illuminate another aspect of his personality. As Milinda Banerjee points out, “Whenever the theme of love is discussed in Derozio’s life, we find not women but boys: love, for Derozio, meant not love for women, but love for his male students” (62). In this regard the poems are not about the love of a female beloved for a male lover, but love of a male lover (Derozio) for other male subjects (his students). The similar concern can be seen in his most famous sonnet “Sonnet to the Pupils of the Hindu College”. The sonnet is usually interpreted as a eulogy for his pupils and his own teaching experiences. But apart from that it contains natural imagery which is erotic and sexual and gives the poem a sensual touch. Whereas the “expanding”, “opening”, “loosening”, “stretch(ing)”, “freshening”, and “weaving” are the natural phenomena manifested by “flowers”, “birds”, “winds”, “April showers”, “rains”, and “chaplets”; at the same time they are the physical / bodily activities which

are engaged in sexual intercourse. The very opening lines of the sonnet make this natural-sexual imagery quite clear:

Expanding like the petals of your flowers
I watch the gentle opening of your minds,
And the sweet loosening of the spell that binds
Your intellectual energies and powers, (1-4)

Although the sonnet is recognized as an admiration for the growing intellect and knowledge of the Hindu College pupils but Derozio's close relationship with his students can also be seen through it. He does not only know the intellectual functions of his students but their bodily manifestations as well. That's why the poem takes natural-sexual imagery to express his deep regard for his students.

"Morning After a Storm" is a poem in which Derozio delineates the aftermath of a stormy night. The fierce power of nature, in the form of a storm, has desolated everything from the village to the surrounding trees and other vegetation. After the night time frenzy of natural power a calm and peaceful dawn descends. The persona goes out not to see and enjoy "the fragrance of a flower" and "sun-illuminated sky" but to observe the disaster which "the storm had made", "The hamlet was in desolation / By the strong spirits of the storm; there lay / Around me many a branch of giant tree," (7-9).

The fierceness of the power of nature has aroused the fierceness or passion of the persona. The strength, might, vigour, and power of one entity are influenced by the other. The persona expresses his love and affection for the natural powers in the next part of the poem when he sings that he loves the doings of the storm. Although disaster cannot be ignored but the persona is particularly focusing his attention upon the power of the storm:

Oh! Nature, how I love thy face! And now
That there was freshness on thy placid brow,
While I looked on thee with extreme delight,
How leapt my heart at the lovely sight! (15-18)

The sensuousness of the tone of the poet can be seen easily in these lines where the nature is presented as "Nature" with capital 'N' by personifying, idealizing, and glorifying it. Either the poet is recalling someone in order to give him / her guise of nature in this poem or he

really feels passionate love for the natural world of flora and fauna. This obscurity of the details is remarkable for the openness of the poem to different interpretations.

Further the persona correlates the natural things and his lover / beloved when he says that the air is like the breath of heaven loaded with the fragrance of roses, and the river is like the breast of his lover / beloved to rest upon, "I stood upon it's grass-grown bank, and smiled," (23).

The persona at the end of the poem says that all this experience teaches him "a moral lesson". But he does not specify which "moral lesson" he learns from the fierceness or powerful disaster causes by natural phenomenon. May be the lessons is that the so-seemed passive looking entities can turn out to be revolutionary and aggressive once faced with required circumstances. Although the natural imagery is working on a symbolic level, but the literal or surface presentation shows that the over intervention in and domination of natural world can cause great damage to the climatic conditions of a bioregion which further poses threats to everything. In this way an erotic presentation of nature with its destructive powers is the focus of this poem.

Another poem which expresses the male-bonding in a natural landscape is "A Walk by Moonlight". The poem beautifully presents four friends going for a walk in the moonlight. The beautiful scenario is observed with a keen sense of its physical and spiritual effects upon the human beings. The poet-persona narrates the yester-night's excursions when he is accompanied by three of his friends.

Three whom I loved –two had high thoughts
And were, in my age, my peers;
And one was young, but oh! Endeared
As much as youth endears. (21-24)

Whereas the poem praises the natural surroundings which provide freedom and liberty to the four friends to explore the deep corners of their souls and psyches, at the same time it also binds them in a spell to feel the mysterious physical and spiritual intimacy with one another and with the outward nature in a free landscape.

The night time charm and beauty of the natural world is illuminated and mystified by the moonbeams. The mysterious and magical fascinations enlighten and awaken the friends to one another as well as to the outer world of flora and fauna, "And there was something in the night / That with its magic wound us;" (37-38). Whereas they feel a strong companionship, at the same

time they also enjoy a unity and harmony with the natural world which is free from the worldly restraints and makes the psyche and soul to float freely and liberally around the space.

In his poem “Song” Derozio presents ecological and sexual resistance to dominant world-views of anthropocentrism and heteronormativity. In the first and second part of the poem the natural and ecological harmony is presented through wild animals and birds. But the natural and ecological bliss enjoyed by animals, birds, and other non-humans is not shared by human beings. The persona sings his grief in these lines:

The timid roe hath e'en a haunt,
The turtle-dove a nest;
And each a mate to share her fate,
But I've nor love nor rest. (25-28)

In order to achieve the same bliss and harmony with the natural surroundings as well as with an ideal lover the persona expresses his wishes to become something other than human. In the third part of the poem the persona wishes either to become “zephyr light”, “elfin spirit”, or “a little flower”. In these forms he might be able to experience or enjoy a harmonious encounter with the natural world of flora and fauna and a passionate intimacy with his lover as he said, “If e'en I were a little flower / To bloom upon his breast,” (45-46).

Similarly in his poem “Poetry” Derozio reveals the youthful vitality and energetic passion through a madman. The behaviour of a madman is considered abnormal and uncommon which does not conform to the normal social standards. This non-conformity to social norms makes the mad person close to natural world where he is not required to conform or adopt any civilized dogmas.

Sweet madness! –when the youthful brain is seized
With that delicious phrenzy which it loves,
It raving reels, to every rapture pleased, –
And then through all creation wildly roves:
Now in the deep recesses of the sea,
And now to the highest Himalay it mounts; (1-6)

In this poem the connection between an insane person and the wild nature, which he enjoys due to his being different from the rest of the human beings, can be observed. The young man is at ease with everything human and non-human. This blissful state of “rapture” is acquired

by shunning all social, cultural, religious, political, sexual, and economic norms. Without these restraints, which restrict his psyche and physique, he is free to enjoy his closeness to nature in an erotic way. The poem resists the rational, logical, and scientific outlook towards nature and those who do not conform to social regulations.

“Freedom to the Slave” is another poem where resistance works on more than one level like ecological, sexual, and national. Here the poet resists the domination of man by other men, of nature by humans, and of non-conformist desire by socially acceptable ones. The persona is singing the song of the liberty of a slave. The poet / persona, being a male, praises the male slave for his emancipation. It reveals the homoerotic desire of the poet. This freedom of man is compared to the freedom of the non-human living beings like birds and animals.

He smiled exultingly to see
The wild birds as they flew,
He looked upon the running stream
That 'neath him rolled away;
Then thought on winds, and birds, and floods,
And cried, 'I'm free as they!' (11-16)

At the end of the poem the poet refers to the freedom of a nation from the control of another nation. Here the poet is focusing the British domination of the Indian nation. Hence the poet sings the glory of freedom on multiple levels where it is seen as the life-giving opportunity to those whose existence is reduced to slavery and other forms of degradation, “It was, perhaps, this extraordinary liberal temper that Derozio inherited that made him say that he 'gloried in the name of "East Indian," and assert that he was 'proud to be called a native of this country” (Chaudhuri 861-862).

Similarly in the poem “Tasso” Derozio presents the “iron hearts” of humans towards non-human beings. The confinement of a bird to the cage is an anthropocentric act where the liberty of the bird is reduced to a cage for the entertainment or enjoyment of human beings.

In such a cage, sweet bird, wast thou confined?
Alas! Their iron hearts no feeling knew;
Yet, while thy spirit in a prison pined,
And while thy grief almost to madness grew, (1-4)

But at the same time the poem can be seen as working on a symbolic level and presenting the inner desire for freedom in all spheres of life like the freedom to live and enjoy the life in one's own terms. And what if the form of desire is non-normative sexualities? What will be the case if the poem is expressing the inner turmoil of the persona whose sexuality is not conformist? In that case the poem becomes a resistance-strategy where the non-human natural world is defended from the growing intervention of humans and the diverse sexual forms from the monopoly of heterosexual norms. This form of resistance builds a coalition just as the oppressive power structures have built.

In his poem "A Walk by Moonlight" Derozio presents the eco-queer resistance through the night time experiences of four male friends who go for a walk in the moonlight. The pleasant nature binds them to one another as well as to itself. This bond creates a coalition where natural integrity and sexually diverse desires are sharing something common which is considered at odds with the socio-cultural and political norms. Here the reason, logic, and rational grounds have dissolved and a mysterious and vague atmosphere pervades the scene.

How vague are all the mysteries
Which bind us to our earth;
How far they send into the heart
Their tones of holy mirth; (41-44)

In such a surrounding the normal standards no longer hold any strength and the deviant or pervert behaviours get strengthened due to the natural world where all forms of differences, diversities, and abnormalities reside. It provides a democratic opportunity to the male-bonding of the four persons where they can experiment with their homoerotic desires. The free natural space as compared to restrictive society and its support to diverse desires can be seen as a form of resistance.

Indeed, as a concept, 'male homosocial desire' seems to concur with the Freudian understanding that sexuality or libido is the ultimate source and truth of our motivations, identities and emotions; and that the diverse array of feelings that occur between men are more or less equivalent transformations of 'desire', regardless of their superficially specific qualities. (Edwards 37)

In Freudian sense the male bonding which is presented by Derozio in his poetry is actually a manifestation of homoerotic desire. The connection between natural world and queer

desire resists the hegemonic views of human centeredness and hetero-patriarchy even more strongly and firmly.

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