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DEROZIO: A CHAMPION OF WOMEN RIGHTS IN *THE FAKEER OF JUNGHEERA*

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ABSTRACT

Women have been struggling for equality since ages. They were ill-treated and discriminated against throughout their lives. The women, who constitute almost one and a half of the population, can visibly be identified as socially eliminated, economically exploited and politically deprived section of society, mainly in developing countries. Purdah system, polygamy, child marriages, *sati* were some bitter realities of the prevailing times for women in India. In Derozio's times women came to be seen as vulnerable. An abiding concern with the plight of widows runs through his poems. His burning desire for bringing radical change in their lives seems to be a strong inspiration for his poems. He is the only Indian who is credited not only for the inception of Indian Poetry in English but also for writing for the upliftment of women in the first place. During the 19th century many upper caste Hindu women committed *sati*. They were mistakenly believed in this cruel Hindu ritual considering it to be a moral act of liberation due to the strong social approval in those times. This corrupt system was prevalent in the Indian society for centuries, and Derozio vehemently protested the system of *sati*. He wrote *The Fakeer of Jungheera* to highlight the issue. The central theme of the poem is to throw light on and protest against the in human practice of *sati* in the contemporary orthodox Indian society.

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INTRODUCTION

Since ages, women have been struggling to be equal to men. History abounds with cases where women were deprived of their rights. They were ill-treated and discriminated against throughout their lives. Purdah system, polygamy, child marriages, *sati* were some bitter realities of the prevailing times for women in India. Even in many modern societies inequality between men and women remains the most disturbing aspect. Although gender inequality is a global phenomenon yet, it is more prominent in developing countries and countries having non-democratic governments. It is the most tragic part of the story of human development that major part of female population i.e., the other half of the total human population, is facing persistent hunger and abject poverty simply because of their subjugation, marginalization and systematic dis empowerment. Clearly, the women, who constitute almost one and a half of the population, can visibly be identified as socially eliminated, economically exploited and politically deprived section of society, mainly in developing countries. In general, there have been more catastrophic implications of growing inequality and poverty for women as compared to men.

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In fact, women have been observing the social codes and regulations formulated by the men of their communities for them. Whatsoever the social belief systems and political structures have been created; all establish only unfair social order. The position of women even in present day social order is necessarily based on rigid patrilineal kinship system almost everywhere. One should also keep in mind that an educated woman is not a new phenomenon as history has in store for it various examples of women who possessed great knowledge and wisdom. The British India saw tremendous improvement in the status of women. Reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, and Jyoti Rao Phule were some of the leading exponents of women upliftment. Others like Woods Despatch played a role of relevance in improving women's education. Ancient India had set encouraging examples when it came to women. Ghosha, Matreiyi, Gargi from ancient period were women at par with men in caliber. The Medieval India witnessed power-wielding women like Raziya Sultan, Jahanara Begum-eldest daughter of Shah Jahan, Zebunnisa Begum-eldest daughter of Aurangzeb. Princess-turned-poetess of *Bhakti* Movement, Mira Bai was a woman of high intellect. Sadly, in Derozio's times women came to be seen as vulnerable. An abiding concern with the plight of widows and orphans runs through the poems of Derozio. His burning desire for bringing radical change in their lives seems to be a strong inspiration for his poems. Even in his early poems we can see this revolutionary aspect of his life with the

twin themes of death and immortality, which resurface more strongly in his later poems. The love for womankind in his poems, the loss of his mother a decade earlier and the death of his sister during this period evoked longing for an imagined homeland, which Derozio understood to be India. This strong identification with India as a homeland helped Derozio to anchor his uncertain identity and locate the discourse of 'nation as mother' within a truly Indian literary and social milieu of the nineteenth century. His social concerns too emerge quite powerfully in his poems like *The Fakeer of Jungheera* (1828) written in English iambic tetrameter, where he weaves a magical tale around the life of a widow and her new found but tragic love with a bandit *Fakeer*. Nair observes about this spirit as: 'The Maniac Widow continues the intense romanticism of man-woman love such as was seen between the Fakeer and Nuleeni and between Prince Jogindra and Radhika.'(42) Derozio introduced an aesthetic discourse in literature that could at once critique the upper caste Hindu society of the nineteenth century and the discriminatory British colonialism. Derozio was very well aware of the treatment meted out to women in his times.

He wanted to change this situation. He is the only Indian who is credited not only for the inception of Indian Poetry in English but also for writing for the upliftment of women in the first place. He is ironically, a progeny of mixed parentage with an English first name and a Portuguese surname: Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, being memorialised as *Indian Keats*. He is often considered as India's 'national', 'modern', and 'Romantic' poet who ignited the flame which melted a coal-tar of a set order and set up an appropriate path for the generations to follow, later known as the Young Bengal Movement or the Bengal Renaissance which aimed at improving the fate of women also. At a very tender age he ascertained himself with his poetic instincts, knowledge of English, and with the broad and liberal thinking against the blind, firm and disgraceful customs of the society. He was among those intellectuals who used poetry as a medium of expression to raise his voice against rigid orthodoxy of the time with his greatest yell. A very remarkable influence of English Romanticism can be observed in the poetry of Henry Derozio inspired by the principles of French Revolution. He was deeply impressed by the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity which are the basic tenets of French Revolution. His passion for teaching and quest for new learning drew around him a group of bright students of the college. He instilled among his students ideas of thinking rationally and freely, to challenge authority, to adore liberty, equality and freedom and to love truth. He created a literary platform named Academic Association for debates and discussions on literature, philosophy, history and science. He spread radical ideas for bringing about social change.

Derozio's poems deal with sensitive issues related to women and make a strong advocacy of solutions to their problems. His poems were written mostly about the derogatory status of women and showed Derozio as a staunch champion of their rights. He made a clear departure from the set conventions and orthodox norms of society especially which robbed women of their dignified and much deserved place. Rosinka Chaudhuri opines about Derozio as the "Greatest of teachers, pathfinder of rationalism, and forceful warrior against the practice of widow-burning" (xxi). Derozio's poems belong to the early phase of Indian English Writing. His poems belong to the period 1800-1830, which was the first fruitful phase of this

upcoming genre. Poetry in his hands became a convenient tool to dramatize and popularize the national cause.

His mastery of English verse forms became evident in this magnum opus. There are a considerable number of poems which reflect his serious concern for issues related to women. But the poem which is taken up for analysis from the perspective of women and their rights is *The Fakeer of Jungheera*. In this poem, he drew upon Hindu as well as Greek mythology as sources of illusion and imagery. This proves not only his strength as a poet but also proves him as a champion of women rights. Derozio started the Young Bengal Movement that attacked the social evils and advocated better social conditions for women and promotion of education for women. He is projected as a champion of women's rights through his poems. It is in this direction that he was looking at women of the society of his times. They were a deprived lot and faced many threats to their existence. The society was in the clutches of social evils and women were their main subject to lash at.

In the days of Henry Derozio, India was gripped by many social evils like 'Sati Pratha', killing girl child applying various strategies etc. Derozio endorses the view of a writer from Indian Magazine calling *sati* the most barbaric and degrading aspect of Indian society. He advocates his point stressing upon education and intellectual development. Derozio seems bewildered by cases of self-immolation. During the 19th century many upper caste Hindu women committed *sati*. They were mistakenly believed in this cruel Hindu ritual considering it to be a moral act of liberation due to the strong social approval in those times. This corrupt system was prevalent in the Indian society for centuries, and Derozio vehemently protested the system of *sati*, both in his social life and in the classroom as a teacher at the Hindu college, Calcutta. Derozio in his famous long metrical poem *The Fakeer of Jungheera* published by Samuel Smith and Company, Hurkaru Library Calcutta, tries to peep deep into psychology of a young widow Nuleeni, who is going to be *sati* on the funeral pyre of her husband. She is a victim of the age-old evil and customary practice looking for someone to rescue her from burning for a person whom she had never loved. The central theme of the poem is to throw light on and protest against the inhuman practice of *sati* in the contemporary orthodox Indian society. Derozio wrote this poem to highlight this social evil.

This rotten system was prevalent in the contemporary Indian society for centuries, and Derozio vehemently protested the *sati* system both in his social life and in the classroom as a teacher at the Hindu college, Calcutta. He wrote this poem to highlight the issue. *The Fakeer of Jungheera* is born of an embodiment of literary influences and genius. Its idea projects enlightened social concerns of a native and is hailed as a 'poem of two cantos without a plot and with few incidents' (Edwards 148) narrated in 2050 lines in English when Derozio was barely nineteen. *The Fakeer of Jungheera* is his most representative and most sustained work', observes Nair (Nair 31). Its narrative may be summarized as: A young widow, Nuleeni, is forced to perform *Sati* and she is rescued by her former lover a Muslim boy who became Fakeer as the orthodox society did not allow him to marry her. In a raid, before he could marry her, he is killed and Nuleeni is found dead in the arms of her dead lover. They became victims of the society. The poem, written in 1828, is remarkable not only for Derozio's secularist theme but also for suggesting liberation of women from the cruel clutches of society. The protagonist of *The Fakeer of Jungheera* is a robber *Fakeer* or a mendicant,

who belongs to some unidentified Muslim sect while the heroine, the widow, Nuleeni, comes from an upper caste Bengali Hindu family. By the “sacred” river Ganges the granite rocks of *Jungheera* stand steep and formidable where daring fishermen guide their swift shallows at high tide to catch fish (Chaudhuri 176). On this inaccessible and huge granite boulder stands a natural hut, the abode of “a holy man” with a heart full of “purity”. The man is described as “His life unruffled, like stream/Flows brightly in devotion’s beam” (176). The social malaise of *Sati* is criticized by Derozio as the mistaken belief that the practice of Hindu widow burning exemplifies, “an act of unparalleled magnanimity and devotion” (Chaudhuri 229) and explains at length the problem and his stance on it. He writes:

The fact is that so far from any display of enthusiastic affection, a Sutte is a spectacle of misery, exciting in the spectator a melancholy reflection upon the tyranny of superstition and priest-craft. The poor creatures suffer from the inhuman rite. They have but little notion of the heaven. Their spiritual guides tell them to look forward to million years of uninterrupted happiness. The choice of immediate death or a protracted existence where to be only must contend their desire is all that is offered to them: and who under such circumstances would hesitate about the preference. The most degrading and humiliating house hold offices must be performed by a Hindu widow. She is not allowed more food than will suffice to keep her alive; she must sleep on the bare earth and suffer indignities from the youngest members of her family; these are only few of her sufferings. The philanthropic views of some individuals are directed to the abolition of widow burning; but they should first ensure the comfort of these unhappy women in their widowhood, otherwise, instead of conferring a boon upon them, existence will be many a drudge and a load (229).

Derozio uses Christian imagery, such as Heaven and juxtaposes it against the Hindu tradition of *Sati*, Muslim prayers and tantric tale of *King Vikramaditya and Baital* to create a familiar romantic atmosphere in the poem. As the story goes, if King Vikramaditya remains steadfast in his love for his queen, he can resurrect her and once more both can find happiness together. The dauntless fortitude and courage that the king exemplifies by passing through the horrible ordeal in the graveyard leading to his triumph, inspires conclusion to the tragic death of the *Fakeer* in the arms of his beloved Nuleeni. If the tale of the *Baital* is true then Nuleeni can again be resurrected in the arms of *Fakeer*, so that he can pass through the horrors and temptations of life. Here Derozio successfully points out that the two star-crossed lovers live eternally together beyond death though denied such an existence in the mortal world. Here, emancipation of love of a prospective *sati* takes place from the victimization at the cruel hands of society. Derozio elaborates upon Nuleeni’s beauty in the following line: “The smile comes from her ruby lips/Like the sun rushing from the eclipse.”(Chaudhuri 202) Derozio wonders how can beauty be wasted, how can a woman be deprived of life, either forcefully or willfully. So he embarks upon a mission of resolving some of the inherent evils of Hindu society, especially the practice of widow burning. The poem *The Fakeer of Jungheera* shows *Sati* practice in the perspective of evolving gender. Without causing offence to any community’s pride, Derozio points out an ignoble practice’s evil effects on women, hoping the community would change its attitude towards them.

Nuleeni, the heroine, belongs to a conservative Hindu society of the nineteenth century. Nuleeni can be interpreted as a victim as she is a young widow of her husband in the first place. The victimization is aggravated by the *Sati Pratha* imposed upon her. Now she is a victim of society. She feels helpless and mentally dead. Her ‘beauty’ and ‘charm’ suffers death. Her rescuer, the robber *Fakeer* dies in the process of saving her from becoming *sati*. Thus the death of her truly found lover deepens her sorrow. She becomes second widow of her lover *Fakeer*, but chooses to die in his embrace and finds liberation from the shackles of an enslaved mindset bathed in cruelty and animosity. First, she is killed mentally and then physically as she opts for it willingly for the sake of her love. *The Fakeer of Jungheera* is a long narrative poem written in two cantos, each running in about more than a thousand lines. The subject matter of the poem is conventional as most of the epics, ballads and narratives deal with traditional themes of love, unsuitable marriage, separation by death etc. In the poem, Derozio is concerned more about the plight of Nuleeni, for it is Nuleeni who is at the center of the tragic tale. She is a figure of misery and a helpless forlorn object of social, religious regimentation. Nuleeni is brought to the spot where her husband is to be cremated. The women gathered there are singing songs in praise of *sati*. In their songs they sing of going to heaven but poor Nuleeni is lost in the thoughts of *Fakeer*. Nuleeni, the beloved of *Fakeer* had never loved her husband. She is pure and beautiful and doesn't want to be *Sati* and end her life behind a person whom she had never loved. She refuses to die on the funeral pyre of her husband. In the deep and strong bond of love, Nuleeni’s lover, *Fakeer* comes and takes her to his abode. He fought with the people at funeral and took Nuleeni with him. Nuleeni left all the relations behind and got united with her lover. They forget their caste discrimination and did not know that they were challenging the ancient and so-called norms of the society. They took the risk to escape and elope with each other rejecting the social order. *Fakeer*, with great courage snatched his beloved from upper class and thus, Nuleeni escapes with the bandit *fakeer* to his cave in *Jungheera* to a life from death. She escaped death but she starts a life of forbidden love though frightened by violent social norms.

She believes that her lover's courage and her unfailing love will finally make them victorious. This brave revolt of the weaker section draws our attention towards the prevailing inequality of the sexes and social malaise pandemic in Bengali society of the time. It can be said that the poem sets an important landmark in the use of social themes in literary texts advocating a fusion of tradition quite popular in 19th century Bengal. Instead of writing of these social issues, Derozio embarked upon a mission of resolving some of the inherent evils of Hindu society especially the practice of widow burning. In this poem, Derozio emerged as India’s first ‘national’ poet as Rosinka Chaudhuri mentions:

As one newspaper review at that time described him, is typical of the disproportionate amount of attention that has been focused so far on the part he played in revolutionizing the social and political life of nineteenth-century Bengal. Buddhadev Bose, the great Bengali critic, pointed out in his introduction to Kalidasa’s *Meghdut*, that the body of Sanskrit literature is like a vast and venerated corpse for the ordinary Indian reader primarily because of the divorce effected in modern life between the everyday and Sanskrit. (xxi- xxii). Henry Derozio, through this poem is opposing evils of the

society of Bengal. The youth supported him for his fresh, new ideas whereas the orthodox and superstitious people opposed him for the same. The valiant revolutionary spirit of lovers in the poem draws our attention towards inequality of the Indian subcontinent. One can vehemently affirm that this poem marks an important step in the use of social themes in literary texts emphasizing a tradition that was quite popular in the 19th century Bengal. How can one meekly surrender to an evil, especially the practice of a widow sitting alive on the pyre of her husband? This question seems to get resolved through the poem. Derozio opens the first canto with the wind wandering gently like young spirits:

The sun lit steam in dimple breaks,
As when a child from slumber wakes
Sweet smiling on its mother there,
Like heavenly hope o'er mortal care. (Chaudhuri 174)

The secular and universal ideas of freedom that Derozio espouses in his poetry do not go well with the separatist and divisional politics of modern India. The poet through the impossible and bold story of a love affair between a Hindu upper class widow and a Muslim lower class *Fakeer* successfully showed a pathway to reflect and criticize the evil of *Sati* that was clutching the Indian society at that time. He did so through the projection of the characters of Nuleeni and the *Fakeer* who are victims of the societal evils but showcase their valour and thus winning over their victimization through their revolt. Nuleeni is afraid of the consequences and her fear comes true as *Fakeer's* lost his life while fighting. Nuleeni holds him in her arms and dies together with him. And thus ends the tragic love story as Nuleeni dies with the person whom she loved. She becomes a free agent to choose her destiny. In ancient time, in our country, women were allowed to choose their life partners on their own. We have the examples from our great books as Rukmani, Parvati, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Sita. These women chose their husbands on their own. Our ancient culture was glorious but the invasions of foreign powers ruined our past culture. These are some of the revisionist consequences of modernity. However, the 'modes of social life that emerged in the early nineteenth century in response to modernity in India now take us beyond modernity' into the information age. The *Fakeer* reflected and criticized the evils of Indian society. *The Fakeer of Jungheera* is a work by a Eurasian. The work serves as a social document of the time period in which it was written. The time period of its creation is the years of slavery under the British rule. A single reading of his poem reveals his romantic nature. His lines breathe the spirit of revolution. Students taught by him advocated social reforms. And it is the rare combination of the spirit of revolution and poetic expressions which renders his poems as holy as the *slokas* written by the ancient's sages for the perfect blend of reality and imagination.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the poem is a fine collage of the poet's thoughts, music, expression, cultural belief, and the indelible impression that the Romantics left on Derozio. Henry Vivian Louis Derozio as a revolutionary is re-examined through an extended interpretation of *The Fakeer of Jungheera* (1828), his 2,052- lines poem which was published when he was barely nineteen and thinking for the emancipation of women. What makes this poem notable, even unique, is that it is the first long poem written by any Indian in the English language. But, more remarkably, it is also an intriguing conjuncture of a complex set of relations at the very beginnings of modern India: British colonialism and local resistance, Christian missionaries and Hindu reformers, pre-nationalism and the imagining of India, evolving gender and patriarchal norms, Hindu-Muslim negotiations, *Sati* and colonial power, to name a few. It is to argue that the conventional ways in which Derozio is understood as a pioneer of women's liberation and a champion of their rights are actually insufficient if not misleading. They throw, as it were, a blanket over not only his singular career, but on the whole phenomenon of emancipation of women. Through the brave rebellion of women characters he draws attention towards the inequality in Indian society. One can say that this poem is related to gender question which marks an important step in the use of social themes in literary texts endorsing a constructive change in the condition of women in the nineteenth century Bengal. Derozio's contribution for the eradication of *Sati* custom is immense. He vehemently questioned existence of the pernicious custom which dogged Hindu religious practices. He also questioned orthodoxy and laid down the foundation stone of a modern Bengal. Derozio, as is clear from the above reference, was not a creature of destiny, he was rather a creator of destiny. Even before he embarked on the journey of intellectual adventure, he as a growing youngster had rejected, even if within his heart, the parental path ornately set before him.

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