In an article published in 2006, Jahan Ramazani makes a valid point — and a point made less often in mainstream critical circles in USA and UK than in those of postcolonial criticism — about the dominance of “single-nation genealogies” in studies of Modern and contemporary poetry in English.\(^1\) Strangely, the case of Indian English poetry can be seen differently: Indian poetry in English has been far too readily and uncritically inserted into the moulds of transnationalism. Perhaps this was inevitable, given its name. After all, while critics talk mostly of English, American, Irish, Scottish, Canadian or, even, Jamaican poetry, we talk of Indian English (or, earlier, Anglo-Indian and Indo-Anglian) poetry. Its very name inserts Indian poetry in English into transnational networks, and while this insertion is correct and necessary to a point, it can also be misleading and unfair to the distinctive character of Indian poetry in English if taken too far.

This insertion starts quite early on. After all, as V.K. Gokak famously remarked: “Indo-Anglian poetry was born under a Romantic star.”\(^2\) One has to agree with this perception to a certain degree, for, at least, historically, when the first significant Indian English poet (Derozio) started writing, major British Romantics, like Lord Byron and William Wordsworth, were still alive. The Romantic star obviously twinkled in the West, and cast its light on Indian poetry in English. But, it did not twinkle in the same way as in the West — far from it. Let us cast a look at an early poem “The Harp of India” by Henry Derozio (1809-1831).\(^3\)

---

Derozio starts his sonnet by addressing, with a degree of apotheosis, “the harp of India”:

Why hang’st thou lonely on yon withered bough?
Unstrung for ever, must thou there remain;
Thy music once was sweet – who hears it now?
Why doth the breeze sigh over thee in vain?

Forget about the Romantic diction of the poem: it would be as anachronistic to blame Derozio for it as it would be to rap the ghost of Lord Byron, who was alive when Derozio started writing, on the knuckle, for poems like “The Giaour” and “The Corsair”. What is interesting is the fact that Derozio laments the silencing of the “harp” of India. This lament fits into a growing Orientalist tendency in the nineteenth century to posit a glorious ancient past for India, and contrast it to the degraded present. This was in keeping with nineteenth-century theories of civilization and degeneration and, later, social evolution, and it could cut both ways: it could be used to defend British colonizers (as restorers of India’s ancient vigour) and it could be used to critique British colonization.

As such, if Derozio’s sonnet, written in English, is a fragment of the new culture of colonized India, it is also – despite being written in English – a critique of present circumstances and, hence, at least potentially a critique of colonization. This aspect is under-girded by the imagery of the second stanza, where the “harp” of India is presented as having been bound by “Silence” in “her fatal chain”, portrayed as “neglected” and compared, perhaps with echoes of Shelley’s “Ozymandias”, with a “ruined monument on desert plain”. If the “ruined monument” is a partly Orientalist construct of the Indian past, the “desert” plain is a potentially nationalist critique of colonization.

The sonnet proceeds. The poet humbly acknowledges his inferiority to the great poets of the past (“many a hand more worthy far than mine”), notes that “those hands are cold”, and concludes:

… but if thy notes divine

---

4 As an aside, it should be pointed out that this constructed colonialist tradition is the backbone of much of Hindutva nationalism today, and, it also explains the overlap between brands of that nationalism and Nazi theories of “Aryan” dominance.

5 Derozio was thirteen or fourteen when Shelley died.