

## The Anxiety of Inheritance: Elizabethan and Victorian Imprints on the Genesis of Indian Writing in English

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### Abstract

The emergence of Indian Writing in English (IWE) in the nineteenth century was not a spontaneous literary event but a complex, socio-cultural negotiation with the English canon. This article examines the profound impact of two pivotal British literary epochs—the Elizabethan and the Victorian—on the nascent style, vocabulary, and thematic choices of early Indian writers. Through a doctoral-level analysis of key figures such as Henry Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt, and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, we explore how the 'mighty line' of Marlowe and the 'earnestness' of Victorian prose provided the structural scaffolding for Indian expression. By tracing the transition from Elizabethan ornate grandeur to Victorian social realism, this study argues that the early Indian literati did not merely imitate British models but strategically 'appropriated' them to articulate a burgeoning national identity and a critique of colonial reality.

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### 1. Introduction

#### The Colonial Library and the Indian Mind

To understand the genesis of Indian Writing in English is to walk through the libraries of nineteenth-century Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. For the early Indian intelligentsia, the English language arrived not merely as a tool of administration, but as a vast, intimidating, and yet seductive aesthetic universe. As the 'Young Bengal' movement took root, the curriculum of institutions like Hindu College became the crucible where the 'Indian mind' first collided with the 'British canon'.

This collision was defined by two distinct literary 'ghosts': the Elizabethan and the Victorian. The Elizabethan era offered a sense of heroic possibility, dramatic intensity, and linguistic exuberance. In contrast, the Victorian era—contemporary to the early IWE pioneers—offered a template for moral earnestness, social reform, and the burgeoning form of the novel. This article seeks to delineate the specific contours of these influences, moving beyond simple 'mimicry' to understand how Indian writers humanised these foreign forms to tell their own stories.

### 2. The Elizabethan Echo: Grandeur, Drama, and the 'Mighty Line'

For the first generation of Indian poets writing in English, the Elizabethan age represented the pinnacle of human expression. The Renaissance spirit of inquiry and the Shakespearean exploration of the self-resonated deeply with young Indians who were themselves undergoing a period of intellectual 'rebirth' or *Renaissance*.

#### 2.1 Henry Derozio and the Shakespearean Sonnet

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, often cited as the father of Indian English poetry, was a man who lived and breathed the Elizabethan dramatic tradition. While his politics were radical and his temperament Romantic, his formal scaffolding was strictly classical. Derozio's adoption of the Shakespearean sonnet form was a revolutionary act. In poems such as "To India-My Native Land" (1828), he utilised the abab cdcd efef gg structure not to praise a dark lady or a fair youth, but to elegise a fallen nation.

His vocabulary was heavily laden with Elizabethan archaisms and metaphors. The use of 'harp', 'minstrel', and 'lotus' combined the Greek classical tradition with Indian motifs, yet

the underlying rhetorical strategy-the building of an argument through three quatrains culminating in a decisive couplet-was pure Shakespeare. Derozio's influence on his students was 'Coriolanus-like'; he encouraged a heroic defiance that was as much a product of his reading of Elizabethan tragedy as it was of French revolutionary thought.

## 2.2 Michael Madhusudan Dutt and the Ghost of Marlowe

If Derozio mastered the sonnet, Michael Madhusudan Dutt was obsessed with the 'mighty line' of Christopher Marlowe and the blank verse of Milton. Dutt's early English works, such as *The Captive Ladie* (1849), are a fascinating study in Elizabethan-style excess. He sought to bring the 'grand style' to Indian themes, attempting to infuse English iambic pentameter with the weight of Indian epic history.

Dutt's personal struggle is perhaps the most humanised anecdote of this era. He famously claimed to 'sigh for Albion's distant shore', believing that to be a great poet, one had to be an English poet. This 'Europe-mania' led him to adopt a vocabulary that was often more archaic than his British contemporaries. Yet, it was this very immersion in the Elizabethan dramatic structure that eventually allowed him to revolutionise Bengali literature. His later Bengali epics are structurally Shakespearean, demonstrating that the 'Elizabethan impact' was a bridge that allowed Indian writers to cross over from traditional Sanskrit aesthetics to modern, dramatic realism.

## 3. The Victorian Hegemony: Order, Earnestness, and the Social Novel

As the nineteenth century matured, the literary influence shifted. The wild, untamed energy of the Elizabethans was replaced by the ordered, moralistic, and often didactic spirit of the Victorian age. For Indian writers like Toru Dutt and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the Victorian era provided the primary linguistic and thematic palette.

### 3.1 Toru Dutt: Tennysonian Melancholy and the Victorian Interior

Toru Dutt represents the 'Victorian' phase of IWE at its most poignant. Having spent time in France and England, her English was not merely an academic acquisition but a lived reality. Her *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882) displays a clear stylistic debt to Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*.

Dutt's vocabulary shifted away from Derozio's heroic archaisms toward a more restrained, melancholic, and sensory-focused diction. Her treatment of Indian legends was filtered through a Victorian 'medievalist' lens-a fascination with the past that was both nostalgic and moralistic. Humanising her struggle, we see through her letters to Mary Martin a young woman who was a quintessential Victorian: deeply pious, hardworking, and fascinated by the 'Condition of Women' question. Her choice of themes-sacrifice, duty, and the domestic sphere-mirrored the Victorian 'Angel in the House' trope, even as she applied it to figures like Savitri and Sita.

### 3.2 The Dickensian Shadow: The Rise of Social Realism

The Victorian impact was most transformative in the realm of prose. The nineteenth-century British novel, dominated by figures like Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray, provided the template for the first Indian novels in English.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), the first Indian novel in English, is a Dickensian exercise in social realism. The treatment of themes-the domestic tyranny of the husband, the intricate social hierarchies of the village, and the legalistic vocabulary-echoes the Victorian concern with social justice and reform. Similarly, Lal Behari Day's *Govinda Samanta* (1874) utilized the 'social documentary' style of Victorian writers to expose the exploitation of the peasantry. This was a significant departure from the 'heroic' and 'mythological' themes of the earlier Elizabethan-inspired poets. The language became more didactic, the vocabulary more utilitarian, and the tone more 'earnest'.

## 4. Comparative Stylistics: From Baroque Ornaments to Moral Restraint

A doctoral analysis of vocabulary reveals a fascinating linguistic trajectory. The early pioneers (Elizabethan-influenced) favoured what rhetoricians call 'Asianism'-a flowery, excessive style full of classical allusions and archaic verbs. This was the language of the 'Renaissance man' re-imagined in Calcutta.

However, by the mid-Victorian period, Indian English began to adopt the 'Attic' style-more restrained, logical, and focused on moral clarity. The influence of Matthew Arnold's 'high seriousness' and Thomas Carlyle's 'gospel of work' led to a more sober and functional English. For instance, the prose of Aurobindo Ghose in his early Victorian-style plays displays a classical restraint and a vocabulary of 'civility' and 'order' that was absent in the raw, energetic outbursts of Derozio.

## 5. Treatment of Themes: The Hero vs. The Citizen

The shift from Elizabethan to Victorian influence also signalled a shift in the 'Hero' of the Indian story.

- **The Elizabethan Hero:** For Derozio and M.M. Dutt, the hero was a tragic, individualistic figure-a Tamburlaine or a Coriolanus-fighting against fate or an oppressive social order. The themes were existential and grand.
- **The Victorian Citizen:** For the later writers, the hero was often a social subject-a woman navigating the constraints of the *zenana* (as in Toru Dutt or Bankim Chandra) or a peasant struggling against the *zamindar* (as in Lal Behari Day). The themes became communal, reformist, and grounded in the everyday reality of colonial India.

This transition mirrors the Victorian era's own movement from Romantic individualism to social responsibility. Indian writers humanised this shift by using the Victorian template to advocate for indigenous social reforms, such as the abolition of Sati or the education of women.

## 6. The Synthesis: A Hybrid Identity

Ultimately, the 'impact' of Elizabethan and Victorian writers was not a passive reception but an active, creative negotiation. Early Indian writers were forced to develop a 'double consciousness'. They had to master the 'language of the master' to challenge the master's narrative.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt's 'Europe-mania' eventually led him back to the Indian epic, but he returned with a Shakespearean sense of tragedy. Toru Dutt used Tennysonian imagery to make Indian legends accessible to a global Victorian audience. This was a process of 'cultural translation'. The vocabulary might have been British, and the style might have been Victorian, but the 'soul' that moved through the words was becoming increasingly and recognisably Indian.

## Conclusion

### The Legacy of the Colonial Library

The Elizabethan and Victorian periods provided the linguistic and formal 'nurseries' for Indian Writing in English. The Elizabethan age gave Indian writers the tools of drama, epic grandeur, and the sonnet; the Victorian age gave them the novel, social realism, and a moralistic framework for reform.

As we look back from a doctoral perspective, it is clear that these influences were not 'shackles' but 'scaffolding'. By humanising these foreign forms, early Indian writers created a unique hybrid aesthetic that eventually paved the way for the radical 'chutnification' of writers like Salman Rushdie. The 'Anxiety of Inheritance' felt by Derozio and Toru Dutt was the birth pang of a new, vibrant, and globally significant literary tradition.

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