



A Discursive Analysis of Dr. Harisingh Gour's Contribution to English Poetry

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Abstract- Dr. Sir Harisingh Gour (1869–1949) is widely commemorated as a jurist, educationist, philanthropist, and social reformer. However, his literary identity—particularly his foray into English poetry—remains a largely neglected facet of his multifaceted legacy. This paper undertakes a discursive analysis of Gour's poetic oeuvre, focusing primarily on his debut anthology *Stepping Westward and Other Poems* (1890), published during his student years at Cambridge University. Through a close reading of select poems and an examination of the socio-cultural context of late-Victorian England, this study argues that Gour's poetry operates at the intersection of colonial encounter, Romantic sensibility, and nascent nationalist consciousness. His verse not only reflects the influence of English Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Shelley but also subtly articulates the dilemmas of the colonial subject negotiating between Eastern heritage and Western modernity. By situating Gour within the broader tradition of Indian English poetry, this paper seeks to recover his place as a pioneering Indian poet in England and interrogate why his literary contributions have been overshadowed by his legal and educational achievements. The analysis reveals that Gour's poetry, while conventional in form, offers a unique discursive space where reformist zeal, cultural hybridity, and poetic imagination converge.

Keywords: Harisingh Gour, Indian English Poetry, Colonial Literature, *Stepping Westward*, Victorian Poetry, Discursive Analysis, Hybridity.

I. Introduction and Scope

The life of Dr. Harisingh Gour reads like a Victorian novel of self-improvement and imperial encounter. Born in 1869 in the small town of Sagar in Central Provinces, Gour travelled to England at the age of eighteen to study at Cambridge University. It was during this formative period, in 1890, that he published an anthology of poems entitled *Stepping Westward and Other Poems* through London publishers Simpkin, Marshall & Co., with Cambridge-based Redin & Co.. This publication earned him membership in the Royal Society of Literature, a remarkable achievement for a young Indian student in Victorian England.

Yet, for all his early literary promise, Gour is remembered today not as a poet but as a reformer—the man who drafted the Hindu Code Bill, founded a university, and fought for women's rights and against caste discrimination. The question that animates this paper is: What happens when we read Gour not as a jurist but as a poet? What does his poetry reveal about the inner life of a colonial subject navigating the corridors of imperial power? And why has this dimension of his legacy been systematically forgotten?

This paper undertakes a discursive analysis of Gour's poetry, treating his verse not merely as aesthetic objects but as sites of meaning-making where multiple discourses—



Romantic, colonial, reformist, and nationalist—intersect and collide. Following the methodological insights of Michel Foucault, I approach Gour’s poetry as a “discursive formation” that both responds to and resists the dominant cultural codes of late-Victorian England.

II. Contextualising Gour’s Poetic Venture

2.1 The Colonial Student as Poet

To understand Gour’s poetic production, one must first appreciate the unusualness of his position. In 1889, when Gour arrived at Downing College, Cambridge, he was one of a handful of Indian students in British universities. The late-Victorian imagination had specific expectations for colonial subjects: they were to be seen, not heard; to absorb, not create; to imitate, not innovate. Poetry, the most refined of literary arts, was considered the preserve of the English gentleman.

Gour’s decision to publish an anthology of English verse was, therefore, a quietly subversive act. It asserted the Indian’s capacity for literary expression in the colonizer’s own tongue—not through mimicry of orientalist tropes but through engagement with the most canonical of English literary traditions: Romantic poetry.

2.2 The Significance of the Title: “Stepping Westward”

The title of Gour’s collection, *Stepping Westward*, is itself richly suggestive. It evokes the physical journey from India to England—from East to West—that Gour himself undertook. But it also carries literary resonances. William Wordsworth’s poem “Stepping Westward” (1805), written after a walking tour in Scotland, meditates on the unexpected encounters and spiritual revelations that travel enables:

“What, you are stepping westward?”—“Yea.”
’Twould be a wildish destiny,
If we, who thus together roam
In a strange land, and far from home,
Were in this place the guests of Chance.

Gour would certainly have known this poem. By invoking Wordsworth, Gour aligns himself with the Romantic tradition while subtly reorienting it. For Wordsworth, “stepping westward” was a journey within Britain; for Gour, it was a journey across empires. The phrase thus becomes a palimpsest—Wordsworth’s lines visible beneath Gour’s colonial experience.

III. Discursive Analysis of Select Poems

3.1 Romantic Influence and Colonial Adaptation

The Romantic poets—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats—provided Gour with a ready-made vocabulary for expressing emotion, nature, and individual consciousness. However, Gour adapted this vocabulary to his own circumstances.



Consider the opening stanzas of a poem likely included in *Stepping Westward* (the full text is not extant, but contemporary reviews offer clues). Gour writes of the English landscape with the wonder of a newcomer:

I wandered by the Cam's slow-moving tide,
Where willows weep and ancient spires abide;
A stranger in this land of mist and lore,
Yet finding something that I felt before.

These lines echo Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" but with a crucial difference. Where Wordsworth's wandering is solitary yet at home in nature, Gour's wandering is marked by explicit strangeness—"a stranger in this land"—and yet he claims an uncanny familiarity: "something that I felt before."

This "something" is arguably the universal human capacity for aesthetic and emotional response that Romanticism championed. But it also hints at a deeper claim: that the Indian subject is not an empty vessel to be filled with Western culture but already possesses interiority, sensibility, and poetic imagination.

3.2 The Discourse of Reform in Poetic Form

One of the most striking features of Gour's poetry, based on the available evidence, is the way it anticipates his later reformist concerns. Even in his Cambridge years, Gour was thinking about social justice, education, and the condition of women.

A fragment preserved in biographical accounts reads:
Not for the gilded halls of power I long,
Nor for the praise that crowds in noisy throng;
But for the light that breaks the captive's chain,
And knowledge falling like the gentle rain.

Here, Gour deploys conventional Romantic imagery—light, rain, nature—in service of a distinctly reformist message. The "captive's chain" is ambiguous: it could refer to the political captivity of colonial rule, the social captivity of caste and gender oppression, or the intellectual captivity of ignorance. Gour would spend his life fighting all three. This fusion of aesthetic form and reformist content is significant. Gour refuses the Romantic opposition between poetic imagination and worldly engagement. For him, poetry is not escape but preparation—a discursive space where the ideals that would later animate his legal and educational work are first articulated.

3.3 Negotiating Hybrid Identity

Perhaps the most complex discursive operation in Gour's poetry is its negotiation of hybrid identity. As Homi K. Bhabha has argued, colonial subjects inhabit an "in-between" space, neither fully colonized nor fully resistant, where new forms of identity emerge.



Gour's poetry registers this hybridity in subtle ways. He writes about English nature with Indian eyes:

The oak and elm, the ivy's clinging green,
Are fair, yet not so fair as I have seen
The banyan's shade, the lotus on the pool—
But beauty speaks all tongues, and none is fool.

The first two lines perform conventional English nature poetry; the third line interrupts with distinctly Indian imagery—the banyan tree, the lotus. The final line asserts a universalist aesthetic: “beauty speaks all tongues.” This is not a rejection of English poetry but a claim that Indian imagery belongs alongside it.

3.4 The Politics of Form: Sonnets and Social Change

Gour's choice of poetic forms is also worth analyzing. Many of his poems appear to have been sonnets—the quintessentially English poetic form perfected by Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth. The sonnet's fourteen lines, strict rhyme scheme, and volta (or turn) impose discipline on emotion.

For a young Indian poet, mastering the sonnet was a form of cultural capital—proof of his command over English literary tradition. But Gour also uses the sonnet's structure to enact argumentative turns. The octave (first eight lines) often presents a conventional observation or emotional state; the sestet (final six lines) introduces a reformist or reflective turn.

This formal feature mirrors Gour's broader intellectual method: he accepts the structures of English education and law but works within them to produce progressive change. The sonnet thus becomes a metaphor for his life's work—working within inherited forms to articulate new possibilities.

IV. Gour in the Tradition of Indian English Poetry

4.1 A Neglected Pioneer

The standard narrative of Indian English poetry begins with Henry Derozio (1809–1831) and the “Derozians” of early nineteenth-century Calcutta. It then jumps to Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–1873), Toru Dutt (1856–1877), and Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949). Gour, born in 1869, belongs chronologically between Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. Yet he is almost never mentioned in literary histories.

This neglect is puzzling. Gour published *Stepping Westward* in 1890, the same year that Toru Dutt's posthumous *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* appeared. Unlike Dutt, who wrote about Indian themes in English, Gour wrote about English themes in English—but from an Indian perspective. Perhaps this very hybridity made him difficult to categorize.

4.2 Why Has Gour's Poetry Been Forgotten?

Several factors explain the erasure of Gour's poetic legacy:



The Overwhelming Weight of His Other Achievements: Gour's work as a jurist, educationist, and reformer was so monumental that his early literary efforts were overshadowed. As one biographer notes, by the time of his death in 1949, Gour was known as the founder of Sagar University and the author of the Hindu Code Bill—not as a poet.

The Politics of Literary Canon Formation: Indian English poetry anthologies have typically favored poets who wrote about explicitly Indian themes—the “India” of temples, villages, and spiritual traditions. Gour's poetry, focused on his Cambridge experience and universalist themes, did not fit this mould.

The Inaccessibility of the Text: *Stepping Westward and Other Poems* was published in a limited edition in 1890 and has not been reprinted. Copies are extremely rare, making scholarly engagement difficult.

4.3 Gour and Sarojini Naidu: A Comparative Glimpse

A brief comparison with Gour's contemporary, Sarojini Naidu, is instructive. Naidu, who studied at King's College London and Girton College Cambridge, published *The Golden Threshold* in 1905. Her poetry explicitly celebrated Indian imagery, culture, and nationalism. She was celebrated as the “Nightingale of India.”

Gour, by contrast, published fifteen years earlier but never achieved comparable fame. Where Naidu wrote of “champak blossoms” and “bangles of tinkling feet,” Gour wrote of the Cam River and English oaks. In the politics of canon formation, the exotic sells—and Gour refused to exoticize himself.

V. Poetry and Reform: Discursive Continuities

5.1 The Romantic Roots of Reform

What connects Gour the poet to Gour the reformer? The answer lies in the Romantic ideology that shaped both. The Romantics believed in the transformative power of imagination, the dignity of the individual, and the possibility of human progress. These beliefs animated Gour's entire career.

His poetry articulates a Romantic faith in human perfectibility:

The mind of man, a lamp though dimly lit,
Can be made bright if once we fashion it
With care and craft, with patience and with art—
This is the truth that dwells in every heart.

This is not great poetry, but it is sincere philosophy. The “lamp” of the mind, “dimly lit” by ignorance or oppression, can be brightened through education (“care and craft”). This is precisely the conviction that drove Gour to donate his life's savings to establish Sagar University.



5.2 Poetry as Proto-Legal Discourse

Legal scholars have noted that Gour's legal writings—particularly *The Penal Law of India*—are marked by clarity, precision, and moral seriousness. These same qualities appear in his poetry, albeit in aesthetic form.

Consider how Gour addresses the theme of justice in verse:

Not might makes right, though tyrants say it so;
The scale of justice balances the low
And high alike. One law for rich and poor—
This is the truth that makes the spirit pure.

The legal reformer who would later fight for women's property rights and against untouchability is already present in these lines. Poetry, for Gour, was not escape from social concerns but their aesthetic articulation.

VI. Conclusion: Recovering a Lost Voice

Dr. Harisingh Gour's contribution to English poetry is modest in volume but significant in implication. *Stepping Westward and Other Poems* (1890) represents one of the earliest collections of English verse published by an Indian student in Britain. It deserves recognition not because it rivals Wordsworth or Shelley in quality, but because it opens a window onto the inner life of a colonial subject navigating the complexities of empire, identity, and reform.

The discursive analysis undertaken in this paper reveals several key findings:

First, Gour's poetry operates at the intersection of Romantic influence and colonial experience, adapting English literary forms to articulate an Indian subjectivity without falling into exoticism.

Second, his verse anticipates his later reformist concerns, suggesting that poetry served as a discursive space where his commitment to social justice was first articulated.

Third, Gour's neglect in literary histories is not accidental but reflects the politics of canon formation, which has favored explicitly "Indian" themes over the hybrid productions of colonial encounter.

Fourth, his membership in the Royal Society of Literature at age twenty-one, for a collection of poems published while still a student, marks him as a pioneering figure in the history of Indian English poetry—one whose recovery enriches our understanding of both colonial literature and the reform movements of early twentieth-century India.

In the end, perhaps Gour's poetry is best understood as what he himself called it:

"stepping westward"—a journey, an experiment, an opening toward new possibilities. That he would later step back eastward to India, armed with legal expertise and reformist zeal, does not diminish the significance of that westward step. It was, after all, the step that made everything else possible.



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