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REVISITING POETRY OF TORU DUTT

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Abstract

The present paper is about Toru Dutt, also known as the 'John Keats of the Indian subcontinent,' and the remarkable legacy of her works. The seminal idea pursued in this paper is to analyze how Indian mythologies influenced and left an impression on the most famous works of this pioneer writer of English literature in India. Most important poems considered in the paper have been taken from her anthology *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. As an ambassador of Indian Mythology and culture, she talks about Sita as a strong woman and paints Buttoo (Ekalavya) in the light of Guru Shishya tradition. By depicting the character of Savitri Human relationship have always been very integral part of Toru Dutt's poetry and her poem "Our Casuarina Tree" is the best illustration of this. The poetry of Toru Dutt is an apt example of illustration that how things, incidences, memories that appear mundane to the eyes of an ordinary person, have been narrated by her in such a vivid manner that these apparently ordinary and simple poems provide intellectual food to the grey matter of the reader. Apart from depicting glorified culture and traditions of India, Toru Dutt transcends between Indian and the western culture easily. The poem Lotus is a good illustration of balance between the two cultures and she paves the way for the idea that how Indian culture can be the light house to the Western world or culture. In nutshell, we can say that her poetry is a great example and proof of Toru Dutt having a deeper understanding of Indian texts and mythology and successfully draws a bridge between European knowledge and Indian culture.

Keywords

Indian Culture and Tradition; Relationships ;Mythology; Indian Classical Texts

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For over a century, Indian writers have been making waves globally for their contributions towards enrichment of English Literature. From Rabindra Nath Tagore to Amitav Ghosh, from Sarojini Naidu to Shashi Deshpande, they have all turned experiences specific to Indian subcontinent into compelling works of letters and these works have garnered attention and acclaim all over the globe. When we talk of pioneers, we can't forget Tarulata Dutt, commonly known as Toru Dutt, the young girl from Bengal (1856-1877). She is also known as John Keats of the Indian sub-continent as she died early at the age of 21 but had already left behind a remarkable legacy of her works. Her father G.C. Dutt was a government officer at a respectable position and wrote an anthology in English which makes us believe that Toru Dutt grew up in a poetically charged environment. Her family converted to Christianity when she was only six years old and subsequently, she was home tutored in French and English so as to seal the impact of Christian classics and religious texts on the innocent brain of Toru. Her mother was not in agreement with the religious conversion and with an intention not to let a Hinduism disconnect be created in her children, she narrated most of the stories from Indian classical Texts which had a profound and never fading effect on the psyche of Toru who based many of her famous poems on the mythological characters of Indian Tradition.

The first in the series is "Savitri" which is a comprehensive poem consisting five parts and 996 lines divided into 83 stanzas of 12 lines each. The story of Savitri has been borrowed from *Mahabharata*. The opening of the poem introduces all the important characters and very dexterously she depicts the contemporary society. Like a champion of female liberty, she highlights that how women in good old days were not confined to Zenanas, a portion of house exclusively reserved for ladies and they were not supposed to be confined to that section of house only. She writes about Savitri:

And gave her of the best they had in those far off primeval days

Fair India's daughters were not pent
In closed Zenanas

.....

Her father let her have her way
In all things, whether high or low;

All the five parts with the exception of the fourth one contains nearly 250 lines. The first part details childhood, beauty of Savitri and her choice of Satyavaan, warning of Narad ji and the final approval of King Madra for her marriage with Satyavaan. The following part deals with Savitri's marriage with Satyavaan and his prophesied death at night in a forest. In the third part, Toru Dutt beautifully depicts the court of Death ruled by Yama. Finally, Savitri succeeds in getting three boons along with life of her husband. She asks Yama to give back kingdom to her father-in-law along with his eyesight. She also manages to get boon of hundred sons for her father as well as herself. The poetess depicts Savitri as an ideal wife, daughter and daughter in law. When her husband dies, she follows the Yama until she gets the soul of her husband freed and manages to get the three desired boons from Yama. The myth of Savitri is of much significance to Indians in general and Hindus in particular. On a day called *Bat Amavasya* Indian married women pray under a tree called *Bargad* and pray for the longevity of their husband. The last lines of the poem underline the importance of myth of Savitri.

Here let us end. For all may guess
The blind old king received his sight,
And ruled again with gentleness
The country that was his by right;
And that Savitri's royal sire
Was blest with many sons,—a race
Whom poets praised for martial fire,
And every peaceful gift and grace.
As for Savitri, to this day
Her name is named, when couples wed,
And to the bride the parents say,
Be thou like her, in heart and head.

Another poem that highlights the presence of Mythical yarns in the fibre of the poetry of Toru Dutt is "Lakshman" which has been taken from the anthology of her poems *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. The poem brings to the light the Tale from *Ramayana*. The poem mirrors close to being a standard Ballad and doubling of number of lines in each stanza may be attributed to reflect the dialogue between Lakshman and Sita. Usage of word "Husband" instead of Ram tells of Toru's knowledge as well as respect of Indian Tradition. Similarly, the words "Videhan, Rakshasa, Daanava" tells of her deeper understanding of Indian mythological texts and the background stories in spite of growing up in anglicised atmosphere of her home. She writes:

"Hark! Lakshman! Hark, again that cry!
It is,—it is my husband's voice!

.....
"Oh calm thyself, Videhan Queen,
No cause is there for any fear,
.....

Was this the gentle Sita? No.

Flames from her eyes shot forth and burned,

Depiction of strong characters like Savitri and Sita by Toru Dutt reflectability of Toru not to accept women as beings of weaker personas. They refuse to accept defeat even in the most adverse circumstances. She paints these characters as embodiments of love and devotion to their husbands. Even in the face of most adverse circumstances, she displays extraordinary character founded on her unflinching devotion to her husband.

Another poem "Buttoo" from Dutt's *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882) tells the story of a figure named Buttoo, whose story mirrors closely the story of Ekalavya from the Mahabharata. In the great Indian epic Mahabharata, Ekalavya is the son of a forest-dwelling hunter-king who goes to Dronacharya to learn lessons in archery. However, after being rejected by Guru Dronacharya, he goes into the woods and makes a statue of Dronacharya, who, he claims, will be his mentor or teacher for archery. After practicing extensively and acquiring mastery in the art of archery, he is able to silence a dog without killing it through the use of arrows. Later, when Dronacharya and Arjuna happen to be passing through the woods, they are amazed to find the dog and are amazed at the degree of mastery such archer would require. Until now, Dronacharya had promised Arjuna he would always be the best archer alive. When Dronacharya and Arjuna meet Ekalavya then, Dronacharya insists that, if Ekalavya considers Dronacharya as his real Guru then Ekalavya ought to give some Guru Dakshina to him. The poetic masterpiece ends with Ekalavya gladly amputating his thumb and offering it as a fee to Dronacharya. The severed thumb was on the sod,

There was no tear in Buttoo's eye,
He left the matter with his God.
"For this,"—said Dronacharya,—"Fame
Shall sound thy praise from sea to sea,
And men shall ever link thy name
With Self-help, Truth, and Modesty."

Dutt depicts nature in the vast majority of her poems, she had penned down herself. Toru Dutt had great exposure to a wide variety of pastoral landscapes from a young age ranging from beautiful gardens of her home in Kolkata to amazing and panoramic landscapes of France and England where she spent many important years of her short abode on the earth. Throughout Dutt's body of poetic work, nature is a mesmerizing place, where one can find sublime beauty as depicted in her poems "The Sleep of the Condor" and "Baugmaree". In some poems, nature is not just a site of discovery, but rather self-discovery and instruction to one self as in "Buttoo," and "The Death of the Wolf". In some of her poems Nature is used to shed light on the nature of human society and mankind as in "The Tree of Life" and "The Sower". In some of her poems, Nature is a place where we are invited to recall

memories and be nostalgic of the past as in "Our Casuarina Tree" and "The Broken Bell". For Dutt, exploration of nature is like exploration of the nature of Being itself and the things which separate or connect humans to other elements within Creation, both animate as well as inanimate.

Toru Dutt as a prestigious ambassador of our culture" was one of the first pioneer Indo-Anglian authors who interpretatively painted the soul of India to the west and thereby acted as a bridge between the East and the West. Toru Dutt translated several French poems into English and also several Sanskrit anecdotes, myths and legends into delightful English verses. After going through many of her poems, one finds her to be like a hybrid figure who symbolizes very smooth transition from one culture to the other. Several of her penned pieces of Poetry can be taken to be like crossroads of different national cultures and traditions. The poem "The Lotus" enacts a kind of fable, in which the poetess uses personified figure of Love who comes to Flora, the Roman goddess of flowering plants, asking her to create the most beautiful flower in the world. After the longstanding argument and feud between the lily and the rose for the title of Queen among flowers is described, Love expresses a desire to have a flower that carries elements of both:

"Give me a flower delicious as the rose
And stately as the lily in her pride."

Next the question arises that colour the flower should be, Love first replies "Rose-red," then qualifies this by saying "No, lily-white,—or, both provide." The poem ends with Goddess Flora gifting Love the lotus, a flower that has both elements of the lily's beauty and the rose's passion. Through this poem the poetess wants to establish supremacy of lotus and also the idea that cultures of west find fulfilment and completeness in Indian culture. She wanted to hint at the supremacy of Hindu religion above others. The poem as such reflects one instance of Toru Dutt having a deeper understanding of Indian texts and mythology and successfully draws a bridge between European knowledge and Indian culture.

The poem "Our Casuarina Tree" is one of Dutt's most famous poems, and it describes a tree near her ancestral home that she connects heavily with her childhood memories of her siblings that have left for the heavenly abode. Casuarina may be an ordinary tree for others but definitely not so for the poet rather has become a part of her life and an integral part of her childhood memories that she shared with her siblings. She opens her poems by giving a detailed and minute description of grandeur of the tree which stands erect wearing a scarf of a creeper that clutches it like a huge Python. She gets nostalgic when she mentions that though tree is all surrounded by birds and bees but the children (her siblings) who used to play in its shade are long gone. This liveliness that surrounds the tree is further described in the next stanza, which tells of a "baboon," "*kokilas*," and "cows" in its vicinity. She further explains that this very tree of casuarina is dear to her not only because of the magnificence of the tree because of her memories of her departed siblings. Even Nature seems to "lament" and ushers forth "an eerie speech." In the fourth stanza, the speaker recalls various foreign shores (namely, "France or Italy") where she heard noise similar to the tree's mournful sighs, and

recalled the tree and her "own loved native clime." Another consistent theme across much of Dutt's poetry is the relationship between members of a family and how these relationships, which are generally considered mundane or everyday affairs, can be talked about into the realms of poetry and art. The tenderness of emotions and care inherent to the members in a family and their relationships are well explored in poems like "Our Casuarina Tree". Dutt speaks about longingness for the missing relations or miss the warmth they once felt among members of their families. Dutt had great interest in undergirding the relations in her poetry and she highlights that relations are fundamental to human existence and these relationships only can strike a balance in the human society.

Towards the end of the poem, the speaker meditates on the "deathless trees" similar to those in William Wordsworth's poem on yew-trees, which she quotes:

"Fear, trembling Hope, and Death, the skeleton,
And Time the shadow."

By contrast, the speaker tells us, she yearns to return to the Casuarina tree of her youth, which she hopes will be saved "from Oblivion's curse." The linkage of the speaker's personal life and emotional state to the natural world is not limited, however, to the Casuarina tree. For example, the birds and bees singing their "one sweet song" from the tree's branches provide solace to the poet through the night "while men repose," which suggests that the poet lies sleepless at night and can be soothed only by the rhythms of the natural world. The "grey baboon" in stanza 2, which sits "statue-like [and] alone" on top of the tree while "watching the sunrise," also reinforces this idea, suggesting that the poet too has watched in solitude as the sun rises behind the Casuarina tree.

In the third stanza, the speaker makes this linkage explicit as she explains that the tree's memory is "blent with [...] images" in her head of her departed siblings. The shared mourning of the speaker and the tree, as conveyed by the "dirge-like murmur" that resembles the waves breaking on a pebble beach, continues to reinforce this connection. In the fourth stanza, this image of the waves breaking carries us to foreign shores, where "waves gently [kiss] the classic shore" but evoke similar mourning in our speaker's mind. This is why, while the rest of the world "l[ies] tranced in a dreamless swoon," the speaker stays awake as the music of her youth, the music of the tree, swims to her in her "inner vision."

In the final stanza, the speaker's care to distinguish the trees of England from the Casuarina tree of her youth further shows the way in which the speaker associates nature at large with her various emotions. While the Casuarina tree stands in for nostalgia, longing, and memory, the trees of England reflect isolation and "verse" that is not true to her own experiences.

This final moment in the poem is also particularly interesting because it implicates the poet herself and the poem itself. The poet is hesitant about her gift of writing poetry, and she feels that her own words are "weak," but she appeals to "Love" in her plea for the tree to be protected from time's ravages. This links the poem not only to Dutt's preoccupation with loss, the natural world, and the complexity of family relationships, but also to her interest in the nature of the poetic craft and how much of life's complexities can be accurately captured in a

poetic format. This moment also lends itself to a larger interpretive discussion about how Dutt envisions the potency of one of her major poetic projects—that is, her choice to use English verse forms like those used by Wordsworth (who she simultaneously seems to respect and dismiss in the poem) to describe Indian scenes like those of the tree and her youth.

But not because of its magnificence
Dear is the Casuarina to my soul:
Beneath it we have played; though years may roll,
O sweet companions, loved with love intense,
For your sakes, shall the tree be ever dear.

Another persistent theme across much of Dutt's literary treatise is the relationship between members of a family and how these relationships, in spite of being considered mundane and therefore can be opened up into the realms of poetry and art. Affection, attachment and care inherent to the family relationships are explored in many of her poems like "The Death of the Wolf" and "The Tree of Life." Other poems, like "Sita" and "Our Casuarina Tree," mention the time when Dutt's poetic characters speak about longingness for or miss the closeness they once felt among members of their families. Dutt values phenomena that are integral to human existence and as such these relationships undergird human society.

Her brief life span spent on this Earth and her passing can be best summed up and understood in the verse originally written by a French Poet De Parny(1753-1814), translated by Toru Dutt herself.

But God had destined otherwise,
And so she gently fell asleep
A creature of the starry skies,
Too lovely for the earth to keep

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