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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH VEER NARMAD SOUTH GUJARAT UNIVERSITY

Certificate

This is to certify that Prof./Dr./Mr./Ms. DHARAMRAT E. TEMBHARE
has participated in the National Seminar on
INDIAN LITERARY TRADITIONS : TEXTS AND CONTEXTS held on
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University, Surat. He/She chaired an academic session/presented a research paper/
~~delivered a plenary talk~~ entitled TORU DUTT AS A TRANSNATIONAL POET

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Toru Dutt as a Transnational Poet

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Abstract

The research paper titled "Toru Dutt as a Transnational Poet", highlights the transnational influences on the young late nineteenth-century poet, who despite often being categorized as a patriotic poet, as evident from her biographical details and correspondences, possessed a transnational view of the world, seeing India both as an Indian would and from a European perspective, even going to the extent of referring to her fellow countrymen as "natives" in one of her letters to her English friend. Having grown up in a family of intellectuals, the family library gave her access to not only Indian epics and contemporary Renaissance discourses in Bengal, but also European classics and English literature from which she often quoted in her correspondence, and the influences of which are apparent in her poetry. Her writings also show knowledge of contemporary literary and cultural journals, including the well-known *Revue des deux Mondes*. Her uncle and his wife enjoyed French and German literature, and Toru Dutt herself had traveled to Italy, Germany, France, and England, staying for a year in France and three in England. This gave Toru and her sister Aru, opportunities to get some tutoring, attend certain university lectures, and be part of the social and intellectual circles in France and England, especially, Cambridge. This research paper is an attempt to present the poet as not of a single nation, but of a world that crosses political boundaries, not forgetting the fact that the India of her time was not the same as the nation-state that India is today.

Origin and Background

Tarulatha Dutt, better known as Toru Dutt, was an exceptionally erudite nineteenth-century poet, born a year before the First War of Indian Independence, in a family of high-caste, upper-class, intellectuals in Bengal. The family converted to Christianity when Toru Dutt was only six years old, which negatively affected the social standing of the family in India. They were no longer welcome at social events, and for a year Govin Chundur Dutt, Toru's father, took his family to Mumbai. After the death of Toru's elder brother Abju, which happened soon after their return to Bengal from Mumbai, the family moved to Europe, making Toru Dutt and her sister Aru Dutt two of the first Indian women to cross the ocean and experience European cultures. They stayed for a year in France, attending a school in Nice for a few months, and three years in England before returning to India, during which period, they also had the opportunity to visit Italy and Germany.

The Dutt family had a house in Calcutta city and another, a garden house, in the suburbs, where they seem to have spent much of their time after their conversion to Christianity, as they had become outcasts in Indian society. Letters written by Toru Dutt after returning from England show her yearning for the freedom she had experienced during her stay in Europe. These correspondences, mostly to her close friend Mary Martin, daughter of a vicar in Cambridge, refer to several of her acquaintances and friends, including pastors and professors of Cambridge,

pointing to the intellectually stimulating social life Toru must have enjoyed during her stay in England.

Education

England and France of the nineteenth century did not offer equal opportunities for women, and even while in Europe, the sisters Toru and Aru had limitations in their access to education. However, they received private tuitions, attended a series of lectures in Cambridge called "Higher Lectures for Women" started by the reformer Henry Sidgwick, and mastered the French language. The letters sent to her cousin Omesh C. Dutt during her stay in England show that reading and discussing, contemporary and classical British literature was part of the everyday life in the Dutt family. Although Toru lived in England during a time when women were not encouraged to engage with arts and be involved in literary endeavors, Dutt showed deep interest in music, paintings, and the theatre. Toru writes in a letter that she gifted her father for his birthday a book of photographs of Georgian paintings. This yet again reminds us that Toru was not unique in her family in her artistic and cultural interests.

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Toru Dutt wished to translate *Le Femme Dans L'Inde Antique* (Women in Ancient India) written by the French writer Clarisse Bader and sent the author a letter requesting permission to do so. Although Bader gave her consent to carry out this project, Toru Dutt had to reply with a letter of apology, stating the deteriorating condition of her health, which forced Toru to abandon this ambition. Biographical data shows that even in her last days, when she was suffering from consumption, she continued with her learning and writing of literature.

Literary Companionship/Literary Works

Toru and her sister Aru were trained in music and painting, which have definitely left their marks in the rhythms and imagery of their poetry. *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* published in 1876 includes 165 poems: one original poem (A Mon Pere) by Toru Dutt, eight poems translated from French by Aru Dutt, and the rest, translations by Toru Dutt. It also contained critical notes on the original French poets. It is impressive that even at the age of 18, Toru was confident enough to state her own judgements on established French poets. Edmund Gosse has commented on the presence of both exceptional insight, and often, the naivety, of Toru Dutt in these critical notes. Aru Dutt had died in 1874 before the book was complete, which explains her limited contribution to this collection. Aru was also meant to illustrate the French novel by Toru Dutt, *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers*. Unfortunately, she passed away long before the work was published in 1879, as had Toru Dutt herself in 1877. *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, another collection of poems, was published posthumously in 1882, by Kegan Paul in London. Most of the poems found in this book are adaptations of stories from Mahabharata, Ramayana,

Vishnu Purana, and Bengali Folklore, and remind us of the interest in Sanskrit that Toru developed in her last years. Seven miscellaneous poems are added at the end of the book, among which is Toru's masterpiece, "Our Casuarina Tree", which is nostalgic of her joyful childhood spent with her siblings, who were no more. Toru Dutt's English novel *Bianca, or The Young Spanish Maiden* remains unfinished. Although the protagonists of neither of her novels are Indian, critics at home and abroad have found them to be Indian in their individual qualities, diction, and allusions.

Literary Influences

Although Toru Dutt spent more time in England than in France, as Edmund Gosse pointed out, she seems to have more affinity towards the French literary culture than the English. Perhaps, it is as T.S Eliot writes: "The form in which I began to write was directly drawn from the study of Laforgue....The kind of poetry that I needed to teach me the use of my own voice, did not exist in English at all: It was only found in French."

The poem "France, 1870" by Toru Dutt shows her sorrow and horror at the transformation of the glorious France that she knew in 1869, to a defeated nation after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, and her hope for the country's victory. She concludes the poem thus:

"Bow, nations, bow/ Let her again lead on the way!" [Here "her" refers to France]

Toru Dutt's feelings towards France and the French cultural tradition were not unnoticed by the French themselves. Clarisse Bader, the French author with whom Toru had briefly corresponded, in her introduction to *The Diary of Mademoiselle d'Arvers* wrote, "She loved our country, and she demonstrated that love, in the hour of France's agony,"

Toru Dutt's writing shows a coalescing of Indian and European cultural and literary sensibilities. M.K. Naik points out that "Her diction is naturally of the Victorian romantic school, and true to the Ballad motif, she employs archaisms like 'hight' and 'dight'."

Savitri describes Satyavan's death in the following words:

"His vestment scarlet reached low down
His waist, a golden girdle dight" [Dight = clothed]

Toru Dutt had memorized the first two books of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Echoes of Milton's description of Satan in *Paradise Lost* can be heard in her poem "Our Casuarina Tree" and it is likely that she was inspired by Wordsworth's "Yew Trees" as well.

In the ballad titled "Sita", Dutt quotes directly from Alexander Pope who wrote in his work "Windsor Forest":

"See! from the brake the whirring pheasant springs,
And mounts exulting on triumphant wings:"

Toru Dutt gives it a very Indian flavor as she uses the quote to describe peacocks:

"...there, "whirring from the brake,"
The peacock springs; there, herds of wild deer race;"

Dutt's poetic style was influenced by the romantic poets especially Wordsworth, and the Victorian lyric poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti. True to the Romantic tradition, in Toru Dutt we find the belief that tumults and conflicts can result in poetry.

The influence of French symbolist poetry abounds in Toru Dutt's poems. For instance, in the sonnet "Baugmaree" the transfer of imagery from visual to auditory as found in the line "red and startling like a trumpet's sound" is very characteristic of French symbolism. We find this again in the poem "Lotus" in which Dutt writes, "Give me a flower delicious as the rose". It is also interesting that "Baugmaree" a poem that abounds in Indian diction is written in the form of an English Sonnet. This is also one of the poems where we find Dutt's discomfort with the violent or intrusive presence of the British in India. In the middle of the description of her private space, an Indian garden, Toru refers to the startling sound of trumpets, evoking military exercises, and reminding the readers of the poet's position as a subject of British rulers.

Chandani Lokuge, editor of the book, *Toru Dutt: Collected Prose and Poetry*, points out that the contest between flowers comparing their virtues, as we find in Toru's poem, "Lotus", is an English poetic tradition. In Victorian England there was a whole system of "flower language" or "Floriography", with handbooks published with information on what qualities or feelings different flowers represent. This information was used to communicate certain meanings and intentions using flowers or flower arrangements in the nineteenth century.

In the poem "Royal Ascetic", we find the conflict between Hindu and Christian beliefs. Dutt privileges the Christian belief of a Holy life as one spent "in the heat and bustle of the world, 'Mid sorrow, sickness, suffering, and sin", laboring with a loving soul over the Hindu belief of a Holy life as one detached from earthly affairs doing ascetic rites. The poem is included in the collection *The Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, which is the result of her endeavors during the last years of her life. To place it in a clearer context, she had already lived for several years in Europe, had been a Christian for much of her life, had only recently studied Sanskrit, and was looking at this legend of Hindustan not only as somebody belonging to the Indian tradition, but also as somebody who is part of the European tradition.

Toru Dutt's Patriotism

Many literary critics have talked about Toru Dutt's identity as an outsider both in England and in India. In England, she could not but be the other, with her dark skin and as a woman from a colonized country. In India, her religious faith in Christianity and European education made her different from others. Having lived in Europe during her formative adolescent years, Toru was unable to accept many Indian practices and beliefs as the norm. Although as evident from her letters to her friend Mary Martin, Toru despised the violence and injustice shown by the British colonizers towards the people of India; India with its idol worship, and many superstitions and injustices towards women, made her detach herself from her identity as a "native" of India.

Toru did not subscribe to the exclusionary idea of nationalism despite the social and political environment of the late nineteenth century. However, she also resisted the cultural monopoly of the English in India. In the political reading of "Lotus", by Dipannitta Datta, she says that Toru is advocating autonomy for the East without separateness from the West. The lotus flower is not separate from rose and lily, but is an amalgamation of their two colours.

In the poem 'Savitri', Toru refers to the "boyish freedom" enjoyed by the protagonist during her childhood. The lack of freedom women experience in India was a subject of vexation for the poet. She writes in her letter to her English friend that the society in India considers it immodest for women to take walks on the street and that she misses the freedom she enjoyed in Cambridge. This sense of confinement was aggravated by the Dutt family's seclusion due to their position as outcasts in a Hindu society. The lack of freedom experienced by Toru as an upper-class woman belonging to a Christian family in a Hindu society might have made her feel more comfortable in European society.

Locating Toru Dutt

Time and again critics have called Toru Dutt as belonging not to a single culture but as occupying a place at the convergence of several traditions, nationalities and cultures. Alpana Sharma Kipling calls this space, a "risk-ridden, in-between space".

Dipannitta Datta and Natalie Phillips stand out as critics who stress Dutt's impressive agency as a writer. They call it "complex subjectivity" and "hybrid subjectivity". Dipannitta Datta says, "Toru's hybridity demands that we be prepared to address the complication or shattering of stable critical understandings of the interactions among nationality, gender, race, class, and religious affiliations in the formation of individual subjectivities."

Toru Dutt's poems show blurring of cultural boundaries.

The French critic James Darmesteter eulogized Toru in the following words:

This daughter of Bengal...Hindu by race and tradition, an English woman by education, a French woman at heart, poet in English, Prose writer in French; who at the age of eighteen made India familiar with the poets of France in the rhyme of England, who blended in herself three souls and three traditions...presents in the history of literature a phenomenon without parallel.

Natalie Phillips of the University of Maryland identifies in this eulogy a conceptualization of Dutt "as blending, rather than erasing or hierarchically positioning different identities"

Inderpal Gerwal, a professor at Yale university, in her podcast for *The Swaddle*, and Natalie Phillips who quotes Partha Chatterjee to substantiate her idea, clearly show that the improvement of the lives of middle-class women in terms of educational and economic opportunities offered by the Indian National Movement came at a big price. The new patriarchy idealized women as untouched by the Western cultural influences and put on them the sole duty of protecting and preserving the Indian traditions, creating a gendered division in patriotic responsibilities. Toru Dutt's patriotism did not stretch as far as to accept the call for women to resist westernization and the Indian nationalists' insistence on separation of gender roles. According to Kipling, Toru Dutt's unwillingness to accept her identity as belonging in a binary relationship such as

"female/male, colonized/colonizer, Indian/western, original/imitative, young/old, sheltered/free", set a precedence for Third World feminists to refuse to settle in a binary politics. Natalie Phillips claims that critical readings that place Toru Dutt in a binary system, even if she is placed within an in-between space, do not do justice to her "strategic self-location".

Conclusion

With her deep interest in learning, engagement with the various cultural traditions that she had the opportunity to experience, and ability to absorb, amalgamate and create from within a unique hybrid tradition of her own, Toru Dutt inhabits a space that stretches beyond the geographical and political boundaries that separate nations, and claim a heritage that is not determined by gender, race, nationality or any other limiting identities. This contributes to the uniqueness and richness of her literary output and makes her poems relevant to a transnational audience.

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