

Recurring Motif of Toru Dutt's Poetry: The Quest for Identity and the Sense of Loss

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Toru Dutt (1855-1877)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toru_Dutt

Abstract

The history of Indian poetry in English reveals a reasonable reticence over racism but it has constantly shown an accented allegiance to the indigenous culture. Most poets are homing birds, singing native tunes on an alien flute and in the process of nativizing it. The Indian who uses the English language feels to some extent, alienated. His or her development as a poet is sporadic. Therefore, it is not surprising, that Indian writers in English are conscious of their

Indianness because, at the bottom of it all, one suspects a crisis of identity. The crisis of identity creates a feeling of isolation and alienation in the mind of a poet. Toru Dutt is such an outstanding figure in the history of Indian English Poetry. She had to live in her earlier years as a spiritual exile in India and later as a real one abroad, due to her conversion of faith from Hinduism to Christianity. It is noticeable that Toru Dutt is the first interpreter of Indian culture to the west. The problem of alienation is intimately related to the loss of and quest for one's identity. Toru never wants to live alone or aloof from society but external factors, forced her to live isolated and alone. Toru fought bravely with her isolation, with literary creativity. Therefore, alienation has become the dominant trait of several poems created by Toru Dutt. Present paper is about this particular aspect of the poetry of Toru Dutt.

Keywords: Poetry of Toru Dutt, Alienation, isolation, loss of identity, Indianness, sense of longing

Indian poets in English, like their counterparts in fiction and commonwealth writers, perceive a plurality of identity emerging from the duality of cultures—a co presence of the twain—the inherited and the acquired traditions, form an essential part of the experience of Indo-Anglican poets. The acceptance of English as a language for creative configuration is an involvement in depth and it exposes the writers to the cultural burdens behind it. The experience of biculturalism has filtered into the lives of all those who have been colonized directly or by a remote control.

Since the duality of cultures is a common factor, the crisis of identity is fundamental to all of them, but the difference creeps both in kind and degree of response as the cultural perspectives vary in each country. Derek Walcott, the West Indian poet, reveals the truth in his anxiety:

How Choose

Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?

Indian culture, unlike any other culture is receptive not reactive. It has something vital and unifying that stood it in good stead in the wake of various invasions and interactions of varying races, languages, and regional traditions. Culture, like a living organism, can sustain and progress only when it shows adaptability to changing situations. This cultural solidarity and its assimilative potency have given our poets a stance different from that of other commonwealth poets.

The history of Indian poetry in English reveals a reasonable reticence over racism but it has constantly shown an accented allegiance to the indigenous culture. Most poets are homing birds, singing native tunes on an alien flute and in the process nativizing it. Toru Dutt is such

an outstanding figure in the history of indo-Anglican poetry. She had to live in her earlier years as a spiritual exile in India and later as a real one abroad, due to her conversion of faith from Hinduism to Christianity.

Alienation has significantly affected the Indo-English literature. The problem of alienation is intimately related to the loss of and quest for one's identity. **Donald Oken** rightly, suggests that it is the loss of identity that results in alienation. The disposed personality's search for identity is, in fact, a commonplace theme in poetical works of indo-English writers, but for most indo-English poets the quest has a peculiarly Indian immediacy.

The identity of the individual and that of his nation are inextricably entwined. While probing his individual identity, a poet forges his nation's identity also the quest for identity in a country like India is, unlike that in west, more socially oriented and less personal. Here the sense of individual coalesces with that of the nation and the individual quest becomes a microcosm for the national identity crisis. The indo-English poet, situated, as he is, finds himself in a strange position. The horns of his dilemma are due to cultural colonization, notwithstanding his political independence.

The Indian who uses the English language feels to some extent, alienated. His or her development as a poet is sporadic. It is not surprising, therefore, that writers in English are conscious of their Indian ness because, at the bottom of it all, one suspects a crisis of identity. The crisis of identity creates a feeling of isolation and alienation in the mind of a poet. The same was the case with Toru Dutt.

It is noticeable that Toru Dutt is the first interpreter of Indian culture to the west. Toru Dutt's ballads about ancient legend of Hindustan symbolize the Indian poet's return to her Indian identity in spite of her crucial fascination for France and England. Toru Dutt's choice is the result of her urgent need to overcome the crisis of identity caused by her sudden exposure to the western culture, literature, and religion at an impressionable age. Apparently, she is not the only poet to turn to India's historical and legendary past. Her immediate predecessors and contemporaries like Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Ram Sharma and Romesh Chandra Dutt were also attracted by it. The young girl faced the dilemma of triple alienation in her own motherland viz., spiritual, social, and intellectual alienation.

Her spiritual alienation was the consequence of her being a Christian convert. Toru was born and brought up in a Hindu family, which later converted to Christianity and that Toru remained a faithful Christian throughout her life. Her family's conversion to Christianity also led to her social alienation. She felt herself estranged from other communities of Bengal because of her denial to live by conservative ideals of feminism of 19th century's Bengal. Toru's early years in India were years of estrangement between the family and orthodox Hindu community. The large Dutt family was itself divided and an insurmountable barrier separated the main body and the Christian division. She wishes that her grandmother had become a

Christian but ‘she is so much better than many who profess to be Christians’. Anybody can understand her mental state, which has suffered such isolation.

Toru’s idyllic childhood in the land of her birth was to mature abroad. In France and England, Aru and Toru under the fostering care of their parents were able to live an isolated, but also a free life. “The free airs of Europe, and the free life, are things, not to be had here. Toru wrote later, recalling her days in England, and added, “We cannot stir out from our garden without being stared at or having sunstroke.” These remarks of Toru Dutt rightly show her frustration and disappointment due to the hostility of orthodox Hindus who regarded the conversion of the Dutt’s to Christianity as an act of treachery, an unpardonable sin. In fact, this conversion is not to be seen as what Erik Erickson calls an identity crisis, but a healthy synthesis of two different levels of consciousness which in the end became a fine spring of poetic fervor. It also symbolizes the union of the western and eastern cultural and moral values and visions.

Toru’s acquaintance with and fascination for the French and English literature led to her intellectual alienation. The implementation of western educational system in the first quarter of the 19th century inaugurated the process of modernization in all spheres of Indian life. It encouraged, in particular, a new awareness about woman so far regarded to be an inferior parasitic unit as having an independent personality. Toru Dutt, the first Indian poet was the product of this new awareness. She belonged to the family that cherished the western ideal of free womanhood. She came in direct contact with the living literary tradition of the West through her stay abroad.

It is time to take Toru’s work one by one in the light of the theme of isolation and alienation. First, we take **A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields**,⁶ which is her book of translation from French poets. Earlier in many places the instances of the feeling of loss and lonesomeness taken from the **Sheaf** have been given in order to prove that Toru was much interested in this seamy side of life.

The **Sheaf** contains poems The Death of a Young Girl, The Fall of Leaves, What the Swallow Says, The Captive to the Swallow, Dost Thou Remember Mary, O Desert of the Heart, The Tears of Racine, Sonnet-Isolation, Loneliness, The Death of the Wolf, Le fond De La Mer, The Lost Path, Autumn Sunset, The Sleep of the Candor, Les Hurlleurs, The Sword of Angantyr, and Sonnet-Autumn. All these poems deal with the theme of alienation and loneliness, sense of loss and depravity.

The poem **My Village** presents a deep nostalgic strain and a sense of longing. Just as has been experienced by Toru herself while living in foreign countries:

O fair sky of my native land.
How much I miss thee here!
And thee, O home- O sweet retreat!

I ever held so dear
Canst thou not, Sun, that openest now
The summer's treasures free,
Give back to me my sky and home
My life and gaiety?

Another example is taken from F. De. Gramont's sonnet, **Isolation**. How magnificently Toru accepts the feeling of isolation on her part as God's grace:

Blest isolation from the world, I see
Herein thy emblem; may thy winding sheet
Guard my soul likewise till its latest hour,
That so through all its journey it may be
Patient, until God's love with generous heat
In heaven unfolds the blossom into flower.

The Captive to the Swallows is the well-known song of Beranger named **Les Hirondelles**. Again, a sense of longing and desire as well as a sad feeling of being detached from her loved ones is presented in this song. The theme of the poem is the captivity of a soldier, who is alone and therefore, welcomes the swallows from afar. He speculates that some of them might have been born upon the roof, beneath whose shade he first beheld, the light of morn. He asks them to impart information to him about his motherland, and his dear people:

Who live there yet? and who have died?
O speak, dear birds, for ye must know, -
Who slumber happy side by side?
And who, as exiles, live in woe?
My country's birds, your tidings tell,
As high ye circle in the air,
Though never heart for me may swell
Nor ever rise the mother's prayer.

At times Toru felt herself confined, chained and depressed. Examples are frequent and one can easily find them in **The Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields**. **The Solitary Nest** written by M. D. Valmore depicts aptly Toru's desolate state of mind which is very touching:

Go my soul; soar above the dark passing crowd,
Bathe in blue ether like a bird free and proud,
Go, nor return till face to face thou hast known
The dream – my bright dream- unto me sent alone.
I long but for silence, on that hangs my life,
Isolation and rest – a rest from all strife;
And oh! From my nest unvexed by a sob

To hear the wild pulse of the age round my throb.

Here her yearning to get rid of her long- drawn illness, her pain, suffering and her triple alienation comes out with sincerity. In many of her translations, as we read them, we get a sense of her nerve, and quite sometimes we find our self on her place.

When Toru wrote her **Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan**⁷ a hitherto half open lotus was now able to blossom out in the rays of the Oriental sun in full bloom. However, much Toru loved England and France, she was subconsciously never at home in writing about these countries or in translating their literature and it was when she gathered **A Sheaf in Sanskrit Fields** that her real poetic worth awoke. As far as the theme of isolation and alienation is concerned, each and every ballad of this book, and the miscellaneous poems, more or less give expression to it.

Savitri, the first legend of the **Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan**, deals with the theme of victory of love over death. Savitri, the heroine of the poem and the only issue of Madra`s wise and powerful king, chose Satyavan as her `life partner and willingly accepted the life of isolation and started to live in the hermitage without any mark of suffering or pain. The fears of many that Savitri could not live in a hut proved false and Savitri liked her new life very much. Still she was haunted by the prophesy of death of Satyavan, made by Narad Muni:

And yet there was a scepter grim,
A skeleton in Savitri`s heart,
Looming in shadow, somewhat dim,
But which would never thence depart.

The same fear Toru also felt after the untimely death of her brother and sister. Just like Savitri, Toru herself bears all the sufferings and waits for that fateful day. Thus, in Savitri, Toru identified herself, in some places, with Savitri, on account of her stoic resignation to the supreme will of God. She expected:

No help from man, well, be it so!
No sympathy, - it matters not!
God can avert the heavy blow!

Like Savitri, Toru, a firm believer in God, passed away from the earth firmly relying on her Saviour Jesus Christ, and in perfect peace.

The next ballad **Lakshman**, tells us about Lakshman, the younger brother of Rama, the king of Ayodhya, who has left his princely pleasures and comforts, on account of his love for his brother. Lakshman lived in the forest with his brother Rama, and his wife Sita. He was

alienated from the rest of the society because he wanted to serve his brother. His alienation was self-imposed and deliberate.

After Lakshman, Toru wrote the ballad, **Jogadhya Uma** there is nothing much of this theme of alienation or isolation.

The next ballad **The Royal Ascetic and the Hind** is the story of King Bharat, who reigned in Saligram. The king was dissatisfied with the muddy, mundane world. He renounced it and went into the Woods to practice his severe penance and rude privations. Everything went well with him until, one day; he had to rescue a fawn struggling in the deep water for life. It became his only companion in his lonely life, and he loves it to such an extent that even at the time of his death ‘the hind was at his side, with tearful eyes watching his last sad moments like a child’ and

He too, watched and watched
His favourite through a blinding film of tears,
And could not think of the Beyond at hand,
So keen he felt the parting, such deep grief.”

Here Toru beautifully expresses the tender feelings of King Bharata, at the time of his departure from this world, for that fawn.

The feeling of alienation is once again evident in the legend of **Dhruva**, as Dhruva was denied paternal love because of a dominant stepmother. She scolds him insolently:

Oh! Thoughtless! To desire the loftiest place,
The throne of thrones, a royal father’s lap!
It is an honour to the destined given,
And not within thy reach.

Deciding to seek the love of the father of the worlds Dhruva declared that I shall try to win the loftiest place which the whole world deems priceless and desires. Dhruva left his father’s palace and went into the woods to practice stern asceticism and at last he gained the ‘The highest heavens, and there he shines a star!’

The next legend is about **Buttoo** (otherwise known as *Eklavya*), eager for apprenticeship in archery from the great Dronacharya himself. He is scorned by the sage and his royal pupils and retires to a forest where he makes an image of Drona and learns his art with the help of his own devotion to the teacher and when the cruel demand is made he did not shrink from giving away his thumb as teacher’s fees. He:

Glanced the sharp knife one moment high,
The severed thumb was on his sod,

There was no tear in Buttoo`s eye,
He left the matter with his God.

The pupil, Buttoo`s self-sacrifice was commendable and reminds us of Toru`s own belief in God and resignation to the supreme will of God. Like Buttoo, Toru herself felt socially alienated, and this feeling finds expression in this ballad in a very remarkable manner:

My place I gather is not here:
No matter, - what is rank or caste?
The question is, - not wealth or place,
But gifts well used, or gifts abused.

The next ballad, **Sindhu**, begins with a helpless and lonely picture of Sindhu`s parents:

Deep in the forest shades there dwelt
A Muni and his wife,
Blind, grayhaired, weak, they hourly felt
Their slender hold on life.

Perhaps the ballad envisions Toru`s parents, who after her death became as lonely and shattered as Sindhu`s parents were at that time, when Sindhu was killed inadvertently by the thoughtless sport of King Dasaratha. In this ballad, Toru very tenderly expressed the deep sorrow and anguish of Sindhu`s helpless parents. The loss of their only son was unbearable for them:

Our hearts are broken. Come dear wife,
On earth no more we dwell;
Now welcomes death, and farewell Life,
And thou, O king farewell!

Another ballad **Prahlad**, to some extent expresses the theme of alienation as he refused to live according to the will of his father, the demon Heerun Kasyapu and chose God as his protector and lord. He says firmly:

My conscience I would hurt no more;
But I shall what my heart
Tells me is right, so I implore
My purpose fixed no longer thwart.

The last legend **Sita** is very touching and revealing. It brings into light the undeserved suffering of that queen in the forest after having been exiled from Ayodhya by Ram at a time when she was pregnant. Sita wept continually and her children also feel it. How can anybody estimate the sense of loneliness of her part as she was born and bred in a royal family, but was

exiled to the forest, without any proper reason? Her loneliness and suffering reminds us of the lonesomeness of Toru's mother after the death of her three children. The most moving lines in the whole of the ancient ballads are the following from Sita:

When shall those children by their mother's side
Gather, ah me! As erst at eventide?

In them we find a deep sense of pathos. Never had Toru written more emotionally or evoked a scene or an emotion as unforgettably as has been presented here in this ballad.

Now come to miscellaneous poems, of **Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan**. **Near Hastings** the first poem presents a feeling of being isolated on her part, as it presents the picture of an alien country. Mark this stanza:

Near Hastings, on the shingle-beach,
We loitered at the time
When ripens on the wall the peach,
The autumn's lovely prime.
Far off, - the sea and the sky seemed blent,
The day was wholly done,
The distant town its murmurs sent,
Strangers, - we were alone.

These lines clearly show that how so ever, Toru loved France or England, by heart she was Indian, and she couldn't forget her Indian origin.

The Tree of Life beautifully describes the feelings of Toru Dutt as she found herself in the midst of holy spirits. She was alone on her death bed and only consolation at that time was her father near her. Imagine the mental state of that girl who has already lost her siblings and having been alienated from the whole world, prepared for her last voyage:

Beside the tree an Angel stood; he plucked
A few small sprays, and bound them round my head.
Oh, the delicious touch of those strange leaves
No longer throbbed my brows, no more I felt ...
"Bind too my father's forehead with these leaves."
One leaf the Angel took and there with touched
His forehead, and then gently whispered "Nay!"-----then, all at once
Opened my tear- dimmed eyes -When lo! The light
Was gone -the light as of the stars when snow
Lies deep upon the ground. No more, no more,
Was seen the Angel's face. I only found

My father watching patient by my bed,
And holding in his own, close- prest, my hand.

These lines portray the whole truth that she should in her supreme moment of happiness plead for her father also to be blessed, shows how much she brooded on the fact that she would be taken from him and he would be left alone sorrowing, for his was not to be that divine vision- not yet.

The last poem of this volume **Our Casuarina Tree** is worth remembering on account of its relation to Toru's past. The tree in the family home at *Baugmaree* where she lived till the age of twelve, is invested with the glamour of 'an Indian childhood, laced with thin reminiscences of English and French literature':

O sweet companions, loved with love intense,
For your sakes shall the tree be ever dear!
Blent with your images, it shall arise
In memory, till the hot tears blind mine eyes!"

Her stay in England only increased her awareness of India she was familiar with:

In distant lands, by many a sheltered bay
When slumbered in his cave the water-wraith
And the waves gently kissed the classic shore
Of France or Italy, beneath the moon...
And every time the music rose, - before
Mine inner vision rose a form sublime,
Thy form, O Tree, as in my happy prime
I saw thee, in my own loved native clime.

Toru, in the fourth stanza of this poem, humanizes the tree; for its lament is a human recordation of pain and regret. Once again, we find a moving detail of a sense of loss and loneliness in this poem. Through her verse Toru has immortalized the Casuarina Tree, which was the sole witness to things past, as she wanted to defend the tree from Oblivion curse. The feelings expressed here are not only of Toru's but the common enough experience of all the exiles. It was Toru's wish to recapture the memories of her childhood in association with the tree:

Therefore I fain would consecrate a lay
Unto thy honour, Tree, beloved of those
Who now in blessed sleep for aye repose,
Dearer than life to me, alas! Were they!

Each and every line of this poem echoes the sense of loss and loneliness, which Toru suffered in the last days of her life.

Her **Sonnet Baumaree** is splendid as an evocation of tree in Toru's garden, no doubt Toru was deep in touch with her Indian background and excellently she connects herself with India through her verses. **Our Casuarina Tree** and **The Baumaree Garden House** both are lovely poems and are the proof of Toru's Indianness. It is quite clear that nobody can survive unless and until its roots are not strong in its own soil. The same is the case with Toru Dutt, Indian environment has given her the fame and name and not her French or English background. Her mastery of English and French become an effective vehicle to express her Indianness.

In fact, in the very beginning, Toru realized this thing, and went back to her own motherland in order to triumph over the feeling of being isolated and alienated. Moreover, her alienation was not self-imposed or by her own will, as in the case with Emily Dickenson, it was circumstantial. Toru never wants to live alone or aloof from society, but circumstances forced her to live isolated and alone. Toru fought bravely with her isolation, with literary creativity.

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