Toru Dutt

Among the early English writers of Indian Renaissance who gave independent outlook, right direction, original subjects, the name of Toru Dutt stands first. Her best work has depth of human motives and emotions and an abiding faith in Indian values. Besides writing in French and English, she turned to Sanskrit literature to get the sacred touch of India's Muse and introduced to the world about her splendour beauty and rich treasure-house of ancient wisdom. It was a matter of deep sorrow that she died so early when her talent was blossoming under the vast auspicious knowledge of Indian myths, legends and folklores. She fascinates us for her personal life as well as due to her creative genius. Like Bronte sisters and Keats, her family, too, became a victim of consumption and she died in the prime of her youth, only at 21. Before her sad and slow death, she lost her elder brother Abju aged only 14 and sister Aru only at 20. Edmund Gosse writes, "It is wonderful to grasp of a girl who at the age of twenty one had produced so much of lasting worth."1 The great Indian critic Amar Nath Jha also writes ," There is every reason to believe that in intellectual power Toru Dutt was one of the most remarkable women that ever lived."2 She belonged to a very rich, respectable and intellectual family of Calcutta. Her father Govin Chunder Dutt was a cultured man steeped into the deep knowledge of the West and the East. Her mother was also a woman of very modest and loving disposition and from her mouth the young Toru had listened the immortal stories of ancient Indian heroes and heroines. The other family members too were highly learned and pursuing the great tradition of music and literature.  Toru's father embraced Christianity and afterwards left Calcutta and settled at Nice, in the south-east of France. Here Toru and her sister learnt their first lessons in French and soon they excelled in this language and used it effectively and proficiently for their literary leanings. Their first literary fruit came out with the title Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields with admiring maturity and depth. Of the 165 pieces, 8 were by Aru and remaining by Toru. Though it was a translation from French to English, but it was marked by a great original genius as Toru's selection and rejection has made it almost a new creative work. No wonder, Edmund Goss read it with 'surprise and almost rapture'. He declared, "If modern French literature were entirely lost, it might not be found impossible to reconstruct a great number of poems from this Indian version."5 Keeping and maintaining the original rhythm, sense and meaning, Toru's translation has almost touched the beauty and glory of newly creative work, pouring her bleeding heart out of the family tragedy in willingly chosen works of French Romantics. Here, in them, she gave free play to her soaring imagination, unchecked and unbounded, loneliness, dejection, ardours and agonies of life. Likewise, her French novel 'Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers' which was published posthumously, has captured the eyes of the public both at home and abroad. She has captivated the music of French language and life.

Our casuarina Tree

'Our Casuarina Tree' is a long lyrical poem with five stanzas of eleven line each. It is about a tree, the Casuarina tree in the poet's Baughmaree house. With time and space, this tree grows and acquires supernatural dimensions. For the poet, the tree manifests all her childhood memories, the memories that constitute her being and therefore the tree is so dear to the poet. This is the reason the poet wishes the tree to become eternal. The poem is no less than an ode to the tree. What is noteworthy here is that unlike the romantics, the poet chooses not a man-made object as the subject of their ode. It is the ever-growing tree, the symbol of eternity and permanence.

Through her poems, Toru Dutt helped in constructing modern Indian identity by keeping present in continuation to the past. She revives and at times even distorts the past to serve the interest of the present .

'Our Casuarina Tree', included in The Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindusthan is a poem dealing with the themes of remembrance and transcendence. The word 'Our' in the title hints that the tree was not just an ordinary tree for the poet, but a part of her life and an integral part of her childhood which was shared by her with her siblings.

The opening lines of the poem describe the grandeur of the Casuarina in minute detail. The poet presents the reader with a view of the prodigious Casuarina erect proudly wearing the 'scarf' of the 'creeper' which clutches it like 'a huge python'.The tree symbolizes a source of life with its birdsong and buzzing of bees, although the children who used to play under its branches are now no more. The birds singing from its branches provide a solace to the poet through the night 'while men repose' suggesting that the poet lies sleepless contrasting the sleeping world.

The 'grey baboon' sitting on top of the tree musing over the sunlight 'statue-like alone' suggests that the poet too has silently watched for hours the rising sun behind the Casuarina tree. The picture of early morning with the 'kokilas' singing, the cows sleepily going out grazing, the white water lilies in the pool in the shadow of the tree create a picture of beauty and serenity.

However, the third stanza of the poem makes it clear that it is not only the beauty of the tree which appeals to the poet, but also the nostalgia which surrounds it. Toru Dutt blends the tree with the loving memories of her dead brother and sister. Dutt presents the tree in a way, as if both she and the tree are mourning for the dead children.

The fourth stanza may refer to Heaven where the souls of her dead siblings would be in the line 'Unknown, yet well known to the eye of faith!'. With the mention of 'native clime' the poet is nostalgic about her motherland.

The poet makes her purpose clear as she devotes her poem to the Casuarina tree, around which her childhood was spent. The reader is brought back to the present here in the last stanza. The poet is hesitant about her gift of writing poetry by mentioning 'though weak the verse' , but she defends herself with her love. The Casuarina tree symbolizes the poet's childhood as well as an image which cuts time and eternity. It brings in her the ability to transcend the confines of space and time and revisit the memories of her past.

Sita

The title 'Sita' suggests that the poem is about the Indian mythological character Sita but the readers must never forget that Toru Dutt's poetry is never about past in isolation. The poem is more about the act of narration and less about what is being narrated to the three happy children mentioned in the poem. These three happy children are Abju, Toru and Aru and the act of their listening the stories is what makes the main theme of the poem. Their mother's story telling makes the scene come alive. Readers along with the children can visualize a beautiful forest where mother Sita is spending her exile period with her sons Love and Kush.

Toru Dutt uses rich imagery in phrases like 'Tall trees: there, in a quiet lucid lake' and 'The peacock springs; there, herds of wild deer race'. Sita is imagined weeping as she has been banished by her husband Rama even after passing the test he took in the form of agni pariksha. Her honesty and loyalty is doubted and there she lay weeping and lamenting. Along with her, the three children are also weeping and this is what Toru Dutt at the time of writing laments. Not because they were weeping but that they are not together now as Toru's siblings as well as her mother are dead. The question with which the poem ends 'When shall those children by their mother's side gather' is therefore a rhetorical question having no answer at all.



What do they gaze on with wide-open eyes?

In the first line we get a picture of 3 happy children sitting in a dark room listening to something. There is question thats being asked by the poet to the readers - what are the three children gazing at with their eyes wide open. What are they listening to that is so interesting that they are involved in it so much.

A dense, dense forest, where no sunbeam pries,

Gigantic flowers on creepers that embrace

Tall trees; there, in a quiet lucid lake

The white swans glide; there, “whiring from the brake,”

The peacock springs; there, herds of wild deer race;

There, patches gleam with yellow waving grain;

There, dwells in peace the poet-anchorite.

In the above line we get a picture of a dense forest. We also get a picture of how dense the forest is. Its so dense that there is no space for sunlight, the forest is covered with trees and its branches, even though its morning it looks very dark. There is big wild flowers on creepers that has grown around the tall trees, there is quite lake which is crystal clear, in that lake there are swans floating and making sound while they stop at intervals , there is peacock which is leaping in joy and a group of deer racing each other. There are patches on the land which are shining with yellow grains, all these things are making the forest a pleasant and peaceful place to live and the poet feels that its like a home for poets, like a religious recluse where they can spend time in solitary and tranquility.

But who is this fair lady? Not in vain

She weeps, - for lo! At every tear she sheds

Tears from three pairs of young eyes fall amain,

And bowed in sorrow are the three young heads.

After the beautiful forest is described the story now moves to another part where the story teller says that there is some beautiful woman sitting all alone in this peaceful forest who looks unhappy and she is crying and this is making those three children who are involved in this story cry as well. They have bowed their head in sadness.

It is an old, old story, and the lay

Which has evoked sad Sita from the past

Now we get a picture of who the story is about, the story teller talking. Its an old story its a story of Sita of Ramayan that is being recalled from the past.

Is by a mother sung……..”Tis hushed at last

And melts the picture from their sight away,

Yet shall they dream of it until the day!

When shall those children by their mother’s side

Gather, ah me! As erst at eventide?

Now we know from the above line who is the story teller is. Its the mother of those three children who is telling a tale from Ramayana about Sita and struggle but when her children seemed sad and started crying after listening to this story she finishes the story in hurry as she is unable to see her children sad. But the poet says even though the mother wants those children to forget the story they would still remember it until the end of the day. Finally, in the end after finishing the story the mother gathers all her children and hugs them pacifying.

To understand the poem easily I have divided it into three parts.

In the first part the three happy children poet (Toru) is referring to is none other than Toru herself and Abju and Aru her siblings. All three of them are in a dark room and have their eyes wide open and are immersed in the story thats being told.

The second part of the poem mainly concentrates on the story thats being told and on the main character of the poem. The story is about Sita of Ramayana and her life in the dense forest after her husband Rama left her alone to survive. The story first explains the beauty of forest, the birds and animals who live there. Then the story talks about Sita who is crying alone in the forest and when those three children heard about it even they start crying for Sita.

In the third part its revealed who is telling the story, its none other than Toru’s mother who had picked up an old tale from Ramayana about Sita which is a sad story about her hardship and those three children get emotional hearing this. Finally in end after telling the story the mother gathers her three children and pacifies them.

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