



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Toru Dutt: Her Life, Mind and Art

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### Abstract

*Toru Dutt is a leading Indian woman poetess in English. She translated the French lyrics one hundred and sixty in all, by some seventy different poets-into English verse, which were later published under the title, A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields. This book (which includes a few renderings by Aru also) attracted the attention of eminent critics and scholars not only in France, but also in England, and was reviewed by Edmund Gosse. Toru's command of English language and the richness and variety of her poetic idiom are amazing. In fact, her translations are nothing but transcreation and reveals the force of her personality in its relatedness with greater cultural and literary heritage. For example, in the translation of Vincent Arnault's "The Leaf" Toru achieves a heightening of emotion, and communicates not only the original poet's sensibility, but also her own. Toru's ballads and legends are significant not merely as cultural and philosophical anthropology, but also as, what Cleanth Brooks calls in a different contexts "a political or religious or moral instrument" The ballads are interspersed with serious observations that suggest much profound thought and familiarity with the best expositions of the Hindu philosophy. In fact, the poet has used Indian myths and fables to illustrate certain moral laws which give final beauty to human life. Thus, the story of Prahlad yields a political and moral lessons authentic enough to constitute the fire and force of a revolution in all times and all climes. Legends of Hindustan are essentially romantic in the treatment of themes. The profusion of lyricism*

and humanization of supernaturalism link Toru Dutt with the English romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge.

**Keywords:** Poetic Idiom, Poetic Imagination,  
Lyricism, Cultural heritage,  
Hindu philosophy.

At the age of nineteen, Toru started learning Sanskrit and mastered this complex language. The classical Sanskrit works she studied include *The Ramayan*, *The Mahabharata*, *Shakuntala*, *The Vishnu Purana*, *The Bhagvata Purana* etc. Aru died in July 1874. But Toru's faith in the will of God helped her maintain her equilibrium, sunniness and optimism. And prompted by the success of her *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*, she announced that she would be able to bring out another 'sheaf' not gleaned in French, but in Sanskrit Fields. This she achieved by publishing in 1882, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, a work rooted in the soil of Hindu thought and tradition. At the same time "the Christian spirit is all pervading". as C.F. Andrews has rightly pointed out. Toru's Conversion to christianity, her profound knowledge at Sanskrit and Indian philosophy, and her voyage out to Europe, helped the poet to build a spiritual bridge between the East and the West. In essence, Toru's outlook is cosmopolitan and the spirit of her poetry proves the emptiness of Kipling's well-known and oft-quoted statement—"East is East and west is west/And never the twin shall meet". While on the one hand her consciousness is firmly rooted in the 'profuse splendours' of the East, she could never forget the delicate landscapes and the stir and bustle in the west. Fisher says: "In the long history at the contact and interfusion of East and West, I doubt whether there is a figure more encouraging or significant."<sup>1</sup> As a moralist, Toru believed that an ideal world order could be shaped out of the good and healthy ideas. Darmesteter, a noted French critic has observed: "This daughter of Bengal, so admirably and so strangely gifted Hindu by race and tradition, an

Englishwoman by education, a French woman of heart, poet in English, Prose-writer in French who at the age of eighteen made India acquainted with the poets of France in the rhyme of England who blended in herself three souls and three traditions..presents in the history at literature a phenomenon without parallel”.<sup>2</sup> It is a measure of her poetic achievement that if a part of French verse were lost, it would be possible to reconstruct a large number of poem from Toru’s translations.

The first thing that strikes us about her poetics is her anxiety for the presentation and interpretation of Hindu myths and legends and thus expound the multi-dimensionality of the Hindu view of life. Although a Christian by faith and soaked in French and English cultures, she was at heart a true Indian and she had heard the stories of the Hindu epics and puranas, stories of mystry and miracle from her parents; and her *Anicent Ballads and Legends at Hindustan* holds a mirror to the soul of India, and breathe, as Edmund Gosse points out “a vedic solemnity and simplicity of temper”<sup>3</sup> The stories of Savitri, Lakshman, Buttoo, Prahlad etc are not mere tales for nursery children, but are instinct, with great moral values. Thus “Savitri” the most ambitious poem in the volume, is the story of victory of true love which can defy and defeat even death.

The story of Jada Bharata in “The Royal Ascetic and the Hind” is based on Vishnu Purana and is interpreted in terms of Christian philosophy. Kind Bharata of Saligram after renouncing his throne and rejecting the pleasures of life, goes away to live as an ascetic in the forest. But the fountain of love bursts forth in his heart when he sees a forlorn hind.

The story of 'Lakshman' is in the form of a dialogue between Sita and Lakshman. On hearing the cries of Rama uttered by Maricha, Sita urges Lakshman to go to her husband's help. The psychological and spiritual tension that the poet builds up in this poem constitutes its real literary beauty. Divided between Rama's instructions not to leave Sita alone, and the latter's accusations, Lakshman finally decides to go to rescue his brother from demons. The poet emphasizes the spiritual bonds that bind the members of an Indian family. In fact nowhere outside Indian society can we get so perfect a picture of brotherly loyalty. In the legend of "Prahlad" taken from the Mahabharata the poet brings out the triumph of good over evil. The Hindu concept of true wisdom and knowledge is epitomized in Prahlad's reply to his tutor Sonda Masco.

Toru's ballads and legends are significant not merely as cultural and philosophical anthropology, but also as, what Cleanth Brooks calls in a different contexts "a political or religious or moral instrument"<sup>4</sup> The ballads are interspersed with serious observations that suggest much profound thought and familiarity with the best expositions of the Hindu philosophy. In fact, the poet has used Indian myths and fables to illustrate certain moral laws which give final beauty to human life. Thus, the story of Prahlad yields a political and moral lessons authentic enough to constitute the fire and force of a revolution in all times and all climes. Legends of Hindustan are essentially romantic in the treatment at themes. The profusion of lyricism and humanization of supernaturalis link Toru Dutt with the English romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge. For instance, after the death of Satyavan, Savitri sits by his body holding anxious vigil. Yama, the God of Death, and the lord of Dharma appears before her; and she marks his approach with a sense of awe and wonder.

Toru Dutt's approach to the ancient myths and legends of India has been attacked by some critics. For example, E.J.Thompson finds in these ballads only "Scattered beauty" and he complains that the poet "Stands outside the themes and does not enter deeply into them".<sup>5</sup> Edmund Gosse also finds fault with them when he says that "the ballads and legends read like traditions of the original in Sanskrit".<sup>6</sup>

The poet's treatment of Indian myths and legends is imaginative and is governed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. She has succeeded admirably in narrating the stories powerfully and investing them with rich symbolic dimensions of implication and meaning.

Toru Dutt is a great lover of nature and she takes us to that almost Keatsian world where beauty and truth become each other's revelation. She can render the sensuous aspect of a scene or a situation with a kind of studied elegance and economy. The apparent richness is achieved through a judicious interplay of sights, sounds and colours. The description of a dark, silent night in the following lines of "Savitri" leaves a permanent impression on our mind.

It may be noted that Toru is intensely conscious of language qua language and an effective use of English is one of her major achievement. English is a difficult language and one has to struggle hard with sentences but to Toru, it comes as naturally as leaves come to tree; and she uses its rhymes and diction with perfect skill and control. She was an accomplished versebuilder with a delicate talent and some outbreaks of genius and she wrote things that were attractive and had a strong energy of language and rhythmic force. E.F.Oaten appreciates her creative and imaginative power and her almost faultless technical skill Toru's craftsmanship in verse is beautifully brought out in *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*.



K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar has rightly observed that Toru's "feeling for words was impeccable, and her eye and ear were alike trained for poetic description or dialogue".<sup>7</sup> Among her shorter poems "Our Casuarina Tree" can claim its place with great, and immortal poems in the whole range of English language, by virtue of its structural beauty, rich and subtle and metaphoric design.

### References

1. Quoted by Harihar Das in *The Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, p.IX
2. Quoted by A.N.Dwivedi, *Toru Dutt* (New Delhi: Arnold. Heinemann, 1977)p.17-18
3. Edmund Gosse, "Introductory Memoir", *Ancient Ballads*, p.XXIV
4. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harlourt Brace and World, 1947)
5. E.J.Thompson, Supplementary Review to Harihar Das's Book, p.343
6. Edmund Gosse, quoted by P.C.Kotky, *Indo-English Poetry.*, Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, p.25
7. Iyengar, K.R.S., *Indian Writing in English*, op.cit., pp.65-66