

*ANCIENT BALLADS
AND LEGENDS
OF HINDUSTAN*

BY
TORU DUTT

AUTHOR OF "A SHEAF GLEANED IN FRENCH FIELDS," AND
"LE JOURNAL DE MADemoiselle D'ARVERS."

WITH AN INTRODUCTORY MEMOIR
BY EDMUND GOSSE.



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TORU DUTT.

INTRODUCTORY MEMOIR.

If Toru Dutt were alive, she would still be younger than any recognized European writer, and yet her fame, which is already considerable, has been entirely posthumous. Within the brief space of four years which now divides us from the date of her decease, her genius has been revealed to the world under many phases, and has been recognized throughout France and England. Her name, at least, is no longer unfamiliar in the ear of any well-read man or woman. But at the hour of her death she had published but

one book, and that book had found but two reviewers in Europe. One of these, M. André Theuriet, the well-known poet and novelist, gave the "Sheaf gleaned in French Fields" adequate praise in the "Revue des Deux Mondes;" but the other, the writer of the present notice, has a melancholy satisfaction in having been a little earlier still in sounding the only note of welcome which reached the dying poetess from England. It was while Professor W. Minto was editor of the "Examiner," that one day in August, 1876, in the very heart of the dead season for books, I happened to be in the office of that newspaper, and was upbraiding the whole body of publishers for issuing no books worth reviewing. At that moment the postman brought in a thin and sallow packet with a wonderful Indian postmark on it, and containing a most unattractive orange pamphlet of verse, printed

at Bhowanipore, and entitled "A Sheaf gleaned in French Fields, by Toru Dutt." This shabby little book of some two hundred pages, without preface or introduction, seemed specially destined by its particular providence to find its way hastily into the waste-paper basket. I remember that Mr. Minto thrust it into my unwilling hands, and said "There! see whether you can't make something of that." A hopeless volume it seemed, with its queer type, published at Bhowanipore, printed at the Saptahiksambad Press! But when at last I took it out of my pocket, what was my surprise and almost rapture to open at such verse as this :—

Still barred thy doors! The far east glows,
The morning wind blows fresh and free.
Should not the hour that wakes the rose
Awaken also thee?
All look for thee, Love, Light, and Song,
Light in the sky deep red above,
Song, in the lark of pinions strong,
And in my heart, true Love.

Apart we miss our nature's goal,
 Why strive to cheat our destinies?
 Was not my love made for thy soul?
 Thy beauty for mine eyes?
 No longer sleep,
 Oh, listen now!
 I wait and weep,
 But where art thou?

When poetry is as good as this it does not much matter whether Rouveyre prints it upon Whatman paper, or whether it steals to light in blurred type from some press in Bhowani-pore.

Toru Dutt was the youngest of the three children of a high-caste Hindu couple in Bengal. Her father, who survives them all, the Baboo Govin Chunder Dutt, is himself distinguished among his countrymen for the width of his views and the vigour of his intelligence. His only son, Abju, died in 1865, at the age of fourteen, and left his two younger sisters to console their parents. Aru, the elder daughter, born in 1854, was eighteen

months senior to Toru, the subject of this memoir, who was born in Calcutta on the 4th of March, 1856. With the exception of one year's visit to Bombay, the childhood of these girls was spent in Calcutta, at their father's garden-house. In a poem now printed for the first time, Toru refers to the scene of her earliest memories, the circling wilderness of foliage, the shining tank with the round leaves of the lilies, the murmuring dusk under the vast branches of the central casuarina-tree. Here, in a mystical retirement more irksome to an European in fancy than to an Oriental in reality, the brain of this wonderful child was moulded. She was pure Hindu, full of the typical qualities of her race and blood, and, as the present volume shows us for the first time, preserving to the last her appreciation of the poetic side of her ancient religion, though faith itself in Vishnu and Siva had been cast aside with childish things

and been replaced by a purer faith. Her mother fed her imagination with the old songs and legends of their people, stories which it was the last labour of her life to weave into English verse ; but it would seem that the marvellous faculties of Toru's mind still slumbered, when, in her thirteenth year, her father decided to take his daughters to Europe to learn English and French. To the end of her days Toru was a better French than English scholar. She loved France best, she knew its literature best, she wrote its language with more perfect elegance. The Dutts arrived in Europe at the close of 1869, and the girls went to school, for the first and last time, at a French pension. They did not remain there very many months ; their father took them to Italy and England with him, and finally they attended for a short time, but with great zeal and application, the lectures for women at Cambridge. In No-

vember, 1873, they went back again to Bengal, and the four remaining years of Toru's life were spent in the old garden-house at Calcutta, in a feverish dream of intellectual effort and imaginative production. When we consider what she achieved in these forty-five months of seclusion, it is impossible to wonder that the frail and hectic body succumbed under so excessive a strain.

She brought with her from Europe a store of knowledge that would have sufficed to make an English or French girl seem learned, but which in her case was simply miraculous. Immediately on her return she began to study Sanskrit with the same intense application which she gave to all her work, and mastering the language with extraordinary swiftness, she plunged into its mysterious literature. But she was born to write, and despairing of an audience in her own language, she began to adopt ours as a medium for her thought.

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Her first essay, published when she was eighteen, was a monograph, in the "Bengal Magazine," on Leconte de Lisle, a writer with whom she had a sympathy which is very easy to comprehend. The austere poet of "La Mort de Valmiki" was, obviously, a figure to whom the poet of "Sindhu" must needs be attracted on approaching European literature. This study, which was illustrated by translations into English verse, was followed by another on Joséphin Soulayr, in whom she saw more than her maturer judgment might have justified. There is something very interesting and now, alas ! still more pathetic in these sturdy and workmanlike essays in unaided criticism. Still more solitary her work became, in July, 1874, when her only sister, Aru, died, at the age of twenty. She seems to have been no less amiable than her sister, and if gifted with less originality and a less forcible ambition, to have been finely accomplished. Both sisters

were well-trained musicians, with full contralto voices, and Aru had a faculty for design which promised well. The romance of "Mlle. D'Arvers" was originally projected for Aru to illustrate, but no page of this book did Aru ever see.

In 1876, as we have said, appeared that obscure first volume at Bhowanipore. The "Sheaf gleaned in French Fields" is certainly the most imperfect of Toru's writings, but it is not the least interesting. It is a wonderful mixture of strength and weakness, of genius overriding great obstacles and of talent succumbing to ignorance and inexperience. That it should have been performed at all is so extraordinary that we forget to be surprised at its inequality. The English verse is sometimes exquisite ; at other times the rules of our prosody are absolutely ignored, and it is obvious that the Hindu poetess was chanting to herself a music that is discord in an English

ear. The notes are no less curious, and to a stranger no less bewildering. Nothing could be more naïve than the writer's ignorance at some points, or more startling than her learning at others. On the whole, the attainment of the book was simply astounding. It consisted of a selection of translations from nearly one hundred French poets, chosen by the poetess herself on a principle of her own which gradually dawned upon the careful reader. She eschewed the Classicist writers as though they had never existed. For her André Chenier was the next name in chronological order after Du Bartas. Occasionally she showed a profundity of research that would have done no discredit to Mr. Saintsbury or "le doux Asselineau." She was ready to pronounce an opinion on Napoléon le Pyrénéen or to detect a plagiarism in Baudelaire. But she thought that Alexander Smith was still alive, and she was curiously vague

about the career of Saint Beuve. This inequality of equipment was a thing inevitable to her isolation, and hardly worth recording, except to show how laborious her mind was, and how quick to make the best of small resources.

We have already seen that the "Sheaf gleaned in French Fields" attracted the very minimum of attention in England. In France it was talked about a little more. M. Garcin de Tassy, the famous Orientalist, who scarcely survived Toru by twelve months, spoke of it to Mlle. Clarisse Bader, author of a somewhat remarkable book on the position of women in ancient Indian society. Almost simultaneously this volume fell into the hands of Toru, and she was moved to translate it into English, for the use of Hindus less instructed than herself. In January, 1877, she accordingly wrote to Mlle. Bader requesting her authorization, and received a prompt and kind reply.

On the 18th of March Toru wrote again to this, her solitary correspondent in the world of European literature, and her letter, which has been preserved, shows that she had already descended into the valley of the shadow of death :—

Ma constitution n'est pas forte ; j'ai contracté une toux opiniâtre, il y a plus de deux ans, qui ne me quitte point. Cependant j'espère mettre la main à l'œuvre bientôt. Je ne peux dire, mademoiselle, combien votre affection,—car vous les aimez, votre livre et votre lettre en témoignent assez,—pour mes compatriotes et mon pays me touche ; et je suis fier de pouvoir le dire que les héroïnes de nos grandes épopées sont dignes de tout honneur et de tout amour. Y a-t-il d'héroïne plus touchante, plus aimable que Sitā ? Je ne le crois pas. *Quand j'entends ma mère chanter, le soir, les vieux chants de notre pays, je pleure presque toujours.* La plainte de Sitā, quand, bannie pour la seconde fois, elle erre dans la vaste forêt, seule, le désespoir et l'effroi dans l'âme, est si pathétique qu'il n'y a personne, je crois, qui puisse l'entendre sans verser des larmes. Je vous envoie sous ce pli deux petites traductions du Sanscrit, cette belle langue antique. Malheureusement j'ai été obligée de faire cesser mes traductions de Sanscrit, il y a six mois. Ma santé ne me permet pas de les continuer.

These simple and pathetic words, in which

the dying poetess pours out her heart to the one friend she had, and that one gained too late, seem as touching and as beautiful as any strain of Marceline Valmore's immortal verse. In English poetry I do not remember anything that exactly parallels their resigned melancholy. Before the month of March was over, Toru had taken to her bed. Unable to write, she continued to read, strewing her sick-room with the latest European books, and entering with interest into the questions raised by the Société Asiatique of Paris in its printed Transactions. On the 30th of July she wrote her last letter to Mlle. Clarisse Bader, and a month later, on the 30th of August, 1877, at the age of twenty-one years, six months, and twenty-six days, she breathed her last in her father's house in Maniktollah Street, Calcutta.

In the first distraction of grief it seemed as though her unequalled promise had been entirely blighted, and as though she would be

remembered only by her single book. But as her father examined her papers, one completed work after another revealed itself. First a selection from the sonnets of the Comte de Grammont, translated into English, turned up, and was printed in a Calcutta magazine; then some fragments of an English story, which were printed in another Calcutta magazine. Much more important, however, than any of these was a complete romance, written in French, being the identical story for which her sister Aru had proposed to make the illustrations. In the meantime Toru was no sooner dead than she began to be famous. In May, 1878, there appeared a second edition of the "Sheaf gleaned in French Fields," with a touching sketch of her death, by her father; and in 1879 was published, under the editorial care of Mlle. Clarisse Bader, the romance of "Le Journal de Mlle. D'Arvers," forming a handsome

volume of 259 pages. This book, begun, as it appears, before the family returned from Europe, and finished nobody knows when, is an attempt to describe scenes from modern French society, but it is less interesting as an experiment of the fancy, than as a revelation of the mind of a young Hindu woman of genius. The story is simple, clearly told, and interesting; the studies of character have nothing French about them, but they are full of vigour and originality. The description of the hero is most characteristically Indian:—

Il est beau en effet. Sa taille est haute, mais quelques-uns la trouveraient mince; sa chevelure noire est bouclée et tombe jusqu'à la nuque; ses yeux noirs sont profonds et bien fendus; le front est noble; la lèvre supérieure, couverte par une moustache naissante et noire, est parfaitement modelée; son menton a quelque chose de sévère; son teint est d'un blanc presque féminin, ce qui dénote sa haute naissance.

In this description we seem to recognize some Surya or Soma of Hindu mythology,

and the final touch, meaningless as applied to an European, reminds us that in India whiteness of skin has always been a sign of aristocratic birth, from the days when it originally distinguished the conquering Aryas from the indigenous race of the Dasyyous.

As a literary composition "Mlle. D'Arvers" deserves high commendation. It deals with the ungovernable passion of two brothers for one placid and beautiful girl, a passion which leads to fratricide and madness. That it is a very melancholy and tragical story is obvious from this brief sketch of its contents, but it is remarkable for coherence and self-restraint no less than for vigour of treatment. Toru Dutt never sinks to melodrama in the course of her extraordinary tale, and the wonder is that she is not more often fantastic and unreal.

But we believe that the original English poems, which we present to the public for

the first time to-day, will be ultimately found to constitute Toru's chief legacy to posterity. These ballads form the last and most matured of her writings, and were left so far fragmentary at her death that the fourth and fifth in her projected series of nine were not to be discovered in any form among her papers. It is probable that she had not even commenced them. Her father, therefore, to give a certain continuity to the series, has filled up these blanks with two stories from the "Vishnupurana," which originally appeared respectively in the "Calcutta Review" and in the "Bengal Magazine." These are interesting, but a little rude in form, and they have not the same peculiar value as the rhymed octo-syllabic ballads. In these last we see Toru no longer attempting vainly, though heroically, to compete with European literature on its own ground, but turning to the legends of her own race and country for

inspiration. No modern Oriental has given us so strange an insight into the conscience of the Asiatic as is presented in the stories of "Prehlad" and of "Savitri," or so quaint a piece of religious fancy as the ballad of "Jogadhya Uma." The poetess seems in these verses to be chanting to herself those songs of her mother's race to which she always turned with tears of pleasure. They breathe a Vedic solemnity and simplicity of temper, and are singularly devoid of that littleness and frivolity which seem, if we may judge by a slight experience, to be the bane of modern India.

As to the merely technical character of these poems, it may be suggested that in spite of much in them that is rough and inchoate, they show that Toru was advancing in her mastery of English verse. Such a stanza as this, selected out of many no less skilful, could hardly be recognized as the

work of one by whom the language was a late acquirement :—

What glorious trees ! The sombre saul,
 On which the eye delights to rest,—
 The betel-nut, a pillar tall,
 With feathery branches for a crest,—
 The light-leaved tamarind spreading wide,—
 The pale faint-scented bitter neem,
 The seemul, gorgeous as a bride,
 With flowers that have the ruby's gleam.

In other passages, of course, the text reads like a translation from some stirring ballad, and we feel that it gives but a faint and discordant echo of the music welling in Toru's brain. For it must frankly be confessed that in the brief May-day of her existence she had not time to master our language as Blanco White did, or as Chamisso mastered German. To the end of her days, fluent and graceful as she was, she was not entirely conversant with English, especially with the colloquial turns of modern speech.

Often a very fine thought is spoiled for hypercritical ears by the queer turn of expression which she has innocently given to it. These faults are found to a much smaller degree in her miscellaneous poems. Her sonnets, here printed for the first time, seem to me to be of great beauty, and her longer piece entitled "Our Casuarina Tree," needs no apology for its rich and mellifluous numbers.

It is difficult to exaggerate when we try to estimate what we have lost in the premature death of Toru Dutt. Literature has no honours which need have been beyond the grasp of a girl who at the age of twenty-one, and in languages separated from her own by so deep a chasm, had produced so much of lasting worth. And her courage and fortitude were worthy of her intelligence. Among "last words" of celebrated people, that which her father has recorded, "It is only the

physical pain that makes me cry," is not the least remarkable, or the least significant of strong character. It was to a native of our island, and to one ten years senior to Toru, to whom it was said, in words more appropriate, surely, to her than to Oldham,

Thy generous fruits, though gathered ere their prime,
Still showed a quickness, and maturing time
But mellows what we write to the dull sweets of Rime.

That mellow sweetness was all that Toru lacked to perfect her as an English poet, and of no other Oriental who has ever lived can the same be said. When the history of the literature of our country comes to be written, there is sure to be a page in it dedicated to this fragile exotic blossom of song.

EDMUND W. GOSSE.

1881.

IV.

THE ROYAL ASCETIC AND THE
HIND.

From the Vishnu Purana. B. II. Chap. XIII.

MAITREYA. Of old thou gav'st a promise to
relate
The deeds of Bharat, that great hermit-king :
Beloved Master, now the occasion suits,
And I am all attention.

PARASARA. Brahman, hear.
With a mind fixed intently on his gods
Long reigned in Saligram of ancient fame,
The mighty monarch of the wide, wide world.
Chief of the virtuous, never in his life
Harmed he, or strove to harm, his fellow-man,
Or any creature sentient. But he left
His kingdom in the forest-shades to dwell,
And changed his sceptre for a hermit's staff,
And with ascetic rites, privations rude,
And constant prayers, endeavoured to attain

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Perfect dominion on his soul. At morn,
Fuel, and flowers, and fruit, and holy grass,
He gathered for oblations ; and he passed
In stern devotions all his other hours ;
Of the world heedless, and its myriad cares,
And heedless too of wealth, and love, and fame.

Once on a time, while living thus, he went
To bathe where through the wood the river flows:
And his ablutions done, he sat him down
Upon the shelving bank to muse and pray.
Thither impelled by thirst a graceful hind,
Big with its young, came fearlessly to drink.
Sudden, while yet she drank, the lion's roar,
Feared by all creatures, like a thunder-clap
Burst in that solitude from a thicket nigh.
Startled, the hind leapt up, and from her womb
Her offspring tumbled in the rushing stream.
Whelmed by the hissing waves and carried far
By the strong current swoln by recent rain,
The tiny thing still struggled for its life,
While its poor mother, in her fright and pain,
Fell down upon the bank, and breathed her last.
Up rose the hermit-monarch at the sight
Full of keen anguish ; with his pilgrim staff

He drew the new-born creature from the wave ;
'Twas panting fast, but life was in it still.
Now, as he saw its luckless mother dead,
He would not leave it in the woods alone,
But with the tenderest pity brought it home.

There, in his leafy hut, he gave it food,
And daily nourished it with patient care,
Until it grew in stature and in strength,
And to the forest skirts could venture forth
In search of sustenance. At early morn
Thenceforth it used to leave the hermitage
And with the shades of evening come again,
And in the little courtyard of the hut
Lie down in peace, unless the tigers fierce,
Prowling about, compelled it to return
Earlier at noon. But whether near or far,
Wandering abroad, or resting in its home,
The monarch-hermit's heart was with it still,
Bound by affection's ties ; nor could he think
Of anything besides this little hind,
His nursling. Though a kingdom he had left,
And children, and a host of loving friends,
Almost without a tear, the fount of love
Sprang out anew within his blighted heart,

To greet this dumb, weak, helpless foster-child,
And so, when'er it lingered in the wilds,
Or at the 'customed hour could not return,
His thoughts went with it ; " And alas ! " he
cried,

" Who knows, perhaps some lion or some wolf,
Or ravenous tiger with relentless jaws
Already hath devoured it,—timid thing !
Lo, how the earth is dinted with its hoofs,
And variegated. Surely for my joy
It was created. When will it come back,
And rub its budding antlers on my arms
In token of its love and deep delight
To see my face ? The shaven stalks of grass,
Kusha and kasha, by its new teeth clipped,
Remind me of it, as they stand in lines
Like pious boys who chant the Samga Veds
Shorn by their vows of all their wealth of hair."
Thus passed the monarch-hermit's time ; in joy,
With smiles upon his lips, whenever near
His little favourite ; in bitter grief
And fear, and trouble, when it wandered far.
And he who had abandoned ease and wealth,
And friends and dearest ties, and kingly power,
Found his devotions broken by the love

He had bestowed upon a little hind
Thrown in his way by chance. Years glided
on

And Death, who spareth none, approached at last
The hermit-king to summon him away ;
The hind was at his side, with tearful eyes
Watching his last sad moments, like a child
Beside a father. 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
O'erwhelmed him for the creature he had reared.
To it devoted was his last, last thought,
Reckless of present and of future both !

Thus far the pious chronicle, writ of old
By Brahman sage ; but we, who happier, live
Under the holiest dispensation, know
That God is Love, and not to be adored
By a devotion born of stoic pride,
Or with ascetic rites, or penance hard,
But with a love, in character akin
To His unselfish, all-including love.
And therefore little can we sympathize
With what the Brahman sage would fain imply

As the concluding moral of his tale,
That for the hermit-king it was a sin
To love his nursling. What ! a sin to love !
A sin to pity ! Rather should we deem
Whatever Brahmans wise, or monks may hold,
That he had sinned in *casting off* all love
By his retirement to the forest-shades ;
For that was to abandon duties high,
And, like a recreant soldier, leave the post
Where God had placed him as a sentinel.

This little hind brought strangely on his path,
This love engendered in his withered heart,
This hindrance to his rituals,—might these not
Have been ordained to teach him? Call him back
To ways marked out for him by Love divine?
And with a mind less self-willed to adore?

Not in seclusion, not apart from all,
Not in a place elected for its peace,
But in the heat and bustle of the world,
'Mid sorrow, sickness, suffering and sin,
Must he still labour with a loving soul
Who strives to enter through the narrow gate.

Anglophone Poetry in Colonial
India, 1780-1913

ed. Mary Ellis Gibson

(Athens, OH: Ohio UP,
2011)

Yet oh! had ONE her perils known,
(Tho' all the lions in all space
Made her security their own)
He ne'er had found a resting place.

55

A Hymn to Náráyena

The Argument

A complete introduction to the following Ode would be no less than a full comment on the Vayds and Pura'ns of the Hindus, the remains of *Egyptian* and Persian Theology, and the tenets of the Ionick and Italick Schools;¹⁷ but this is not the place for so vast a disquisition.¹⁸ It will be sufficient here to premise, that the inextricable difficulties attending the *vulgar notion of material substances*, concerning which,

"We know this only, that we nothing know,"¹⁹

induced many of the wisest among the Ancients, and some of the most enlightened among the Moderns, to believe, that the whole Creation was rather an *energy* than a *work*, by which the Infinite Being, who is present at all times in all places, exhibits to the minds of his creatures a set of perceptions, like a wonderful picture or piece of musick, always varied, yet always uniform; so that all bodies and their qualities exist, indeed, to every wise and useful purpose, but exist only as far they are *perceived*; a theory no less pious than sublime, and as different from any principle of Atheism, as the brightest sunshine differs from the blackest midnight. This *illusiv operation* of the Deity the Hindu philosophers call, *Máyá*, or *Deception*; and the word occurs in this sense more than once in the commentary on the *Rig Vayd*, by the great Vasishtha, of which Mr. Halhed²⁰ has given us an admirable specimen.

The *first stanza* of the Hymn represents the sublimest attributes of the Supreme Being, and the three forms, in which they most clearly appear to us, *Power, Wisdom, and Goodness*, or, in the language of Orpheus and his disciples, *Love*: the second comprises the *Indian and Egyptian doctrine* of the Divine Essence and Archetypal *Ideas*; for a distinct account of which the reader must be referred

17. Vayds: Vedas. Ionick and Italick Schools: Greek and Roman gods.

18. Jones's "Argument" provides the equivalent of notes to the poem, as he hopes to explain Indian deities and his own rhetorical and poetic practices.

19. Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, IV:260-61.

20. Nathaniel Brassy Halhed: Jones's friend Halhed wrote *A Code of Gentoo Laws*, which included a translation of Vasishtha's commentary on the *Rig Veda*.

to a noble description in the sixth book of Plato's *Republic*; and the fine explanation of that passage in an elegant discourse by the author of *Cyrus*,²¹ from whose learned work a hint has been borrowed for the conclusion of this piece. The *third* and *fourth* are taken from the Institutes of Menu, and the eighteenth *Puran* of Vyásá, entitled *Srey Bhagawat*, part of which has been translated into *Persian*, not without elegance, but rather too paraphrastically. From Brehme, or the *Great Being*, in the neuter gender, is formed Brehmá, in the *masculine*; and the second word is appropriated to the *creative power* of the Divinity.²²

The spirit of God, call'd Náráyena, or *moving on the water*, has a multiplicity of other epithets in Sanscrit, the principal of which are introduced, expressly or by allusion, in the *fifth* stanza; and two of them contain the names of the *evil beings*, who are feigned to have sprung from the ears of Vishnu; for thus the divine spirit is entitled, when considered as the *preserving power*: the *sixth* ascribes the perception of *secondary* qualities by our senses to the immediate influence of Máyá; and the *seventh* imputes to her operation the *primary* qualities of *extension* and *solidity*.

The Hymn

Spirit of Spirits, who, through ev'ry part
 Of space expanded and of endless time,
 Beyond the stretch of lab'ring thought sublime,
 Badst uproar into beauteous order start,
 Before Heav'n was, Thou art; 5
 Ere spheres beneath us roll'd or spheres above,
 Ere earth in firmamental ether hung,
 Thou satst alone; till, through thy mystick Love,
 Things unexisting to existence sprung,
 And grateful descant sung. 10
 What first impell'd thee to exert thy might?
 Goodness unlimited. What glorious light
 Thy pow'r directed? Wisdom without bound.
 What prov'd it first? Oh! guide my fancy right;
 Oh! raise from cumbrous ground 15
 My soul in rapture drown'd,

That fearless it may soar on wings of fire;
 For Thou, who only knowst, Thou only canst inspire.

Wrapt in eternal solitary shade,
 Th' impenetrable gloom of light intense, 20
 Impervious, inaccessible, immense,
 Ere spirits were infus'd or forms display'd,
 BREHM his own Mind survey'd,
 As mortal eyes (thus finite we compare
 With infinite) in smoothest mirrors gaze: 25
 Swift, at his look, a shape supremely fair
 Leap'd into being with a boundless blaze,
 That fifty suns might daze.
 Primeval MAYA was the Goddess nam'd,
 Who to her sire, with Love divine inflam'd, 30
 A casket gave with rich *Ideas* fill'd,
 From which this gorgeous Universe he fram'd;
 For, when th' Almighty will'd,
 Unnumber'd worlds to build,
 From Unity diversified he sprang, 35
 While gay Creation laugh'd, and procreant Nature rang.

First an all-potent all-pervading sound
 Bade flow the waters—and the waters flow'd,
 Exulting in their measureless abode,
 Diffusive, multitudinous, profound, 40
 Above, beneath, around;
 Then o'er the vast expanse primordial wind
 Breath'd gently, till a lucid bubble rose,
 Which grew in perfect shape an Egg refin'd:
 Created substance no such lustre shows, 45
 Earth no such beauty knows.
 Above the warring waves it danc'd elate,
 Till from its bursting shell with lovely state
 A form cerulean flutter'd o'er the deep,
 Brightest of beings, greatest of the great: 50
 Who, not as mortals steep,
 Their eyes in dewy sleep,
 But heav'nly-pensive on the Lotos lay,
 That blossom'd at his touch and shed a golden ray.

21. Michael Franklin in *Selected Works* identifies the author of *Cyrus* as John Hoole, whose play on the founder of the Persian Empire was first performed in 1768. Hoole also translated Tasso, the Italian poet much loved by William and Anna Maria Jones.

22. All these transliterations are now normally rendered as *Brahma*.

Hail, primal blossom! hail empyreal gem! 55
 KEMEL, or PEDMA, or whate'er high name²³
 Delight thee, say, what four-form'd Godhead came,
 With graceful stole and beamy diadem,
 Forth from thy verdant stem?
 Full-gifted BREHMA! Rapt in solemn thought 60
 He stood, and round his eyes fire-darting threw;
 But, whilst his viewless origin he sought,
 One plain he saw of living waters blue,
 Their spring nor saw nor knew.
 Then, in his parent stalk again retir'd, 65
 With restless pain for ages he inquir'd
 What were his pow'rs, by whom, and why conferr'd:
 With doubts perplex'd, with keen impatience fir'd
 He rose, and rising heard
 Th' unknown all-knowing Word,— 70
 "BREHMA! no more in vain research persist:
 My veil thou canst not move—Go; bid all worlds exist."
 Hail, self-existent, in celestial speech
 NARAYEN, from thy wat'ry cradle, nam'd;
 Or VENAMALY²⁴ may I sing unblam'd, 75
 With flow'ry braids, that to thy sandals reach,
 Whose beauties, who can teach?
 Or high PEITAMBER²⁵ clad in yellow robes
 Than sunbeams brighter in meridian glow,
 That weave their heav'n-spun light o'er circling globes? 80
 Unwearied, lotos-eyed, with dreadful bow,
 Dire Evil's constant foe!
 Great PEDMANABHA,²⁶ o'er thy cherish'd world
 The pointed *Checra*,²⁷ by thy fingers whirl'd,
 Fierce KYTABH shall destroy and MEDHU grim 85
 To black despair and deep destruction hurl'd.²⁸

23. Kemel and Pedma: the goddess Lakshmi is often addressed as Kamalā or Padmā (lotus).

24. Venemaly, or Vana-malā (garland of the forest): garland worn by Vishnu and his various incarnations, including Krishna.

25. Peitamber, or Pitāmbara: glossed by Franklin as "the golden yellow veil or robe worn by Vishnu and his incarnations. It is woven of three threads representing the letters of the sacred syllable AUM" (*Selected Works*, III).

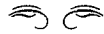
26. Pedmanabha: Jones's transliteration of Padma-nābha, or Vishnu, whose navel gives rise to the lotus that supports the world.

27. Checra, or cakra: Vishnu's weapon.

28. Kytabh and Medhu: Kaitabh and Madhu were two asuras, or demons, who were to annihilate either Brahma or the Vedas. Vishnu slew them, hence his name Madhusudana (killer of Madhu).

Such views my senses dim,
 My eyes in darkness swim:
 What eye can bear thy blaze, what utt'rance tell
 Thy deeds with silver trump or many-wreathed shell? 90
 Omniscient Spirit, whose all-ruling pow'r
 Bids from each sense bright emanations beam;
 Glows in the rainbow, sparkles in the stream,
 Smiles in the bud, and glistens in the flow'r
 That crowns each vernal bow'r; 95
 Sighs in the gale, and warbles in the throat
 Of ev'ry bird, that hails the bloomy spring,
 Or tells his love in many a liquid note,
 Whilst envious artists touch the rival string,
 Till rocks and forests ring; 100
 Breathes in rich fragrance from the sandal grove,
 Or where the precious musk-deer playful rove;
 In dulcet juice from clust'ring fruit distills,
 And burns salubrious in the tasteful clove:
 Soft banks and verd'rous hills 105
 Thy present influence fills;
 In air, in floods, in caverns, woods, and plains;
 Thy will inspirits all, thy sov'reign MAYA reigns.
 Blue crystal vault, and elemental fires,
 That in th' ethereal fluid blaze and breathe; 110
 Thou, tossing main, whose snaky branches wreathe
 This pensile orb with intertwined gyres;
 Mountains, whose radiant spires
 Presumptuous rear their summits to the skies,
 And blend their em'rald hue with sapphire light; 115
 Smooth meads and lawns, that glow with varying dyes
 Of dew-bespangled leaves and blossoms bright,
 Hence! vanish from my sight:
 Delusive Pictures! unsubstantial shows!
 My soul absorb'd One only Being knows, 120
 Of all perceptions One abundant source,
 Whence ev'ry object ev'ry moment flows:
 Suns hence derive their force,
 Hence planets learn their course;
 But suns and fading worlds I view no more: 125
 GOD only I perceive; GOD only I adore.

Toru Dutt



TORU DUTT (1856–1877), like her predecessor H. L. V. Derozio, became a remarkably accomplished poet in a remarkably short time. Derozio is frequently called the “Indian Keats.” In a similar fashion, Toru Dutt has often been compared to the Brontës. Like Emily Brontë, Toru was precocious and intellectually a free spirit. Like Charlotte, she survived her siblings only to die young herself. Although she was barely twenty-one at the time of her death, Toru Dutt was the first Indian woman to write poetry in English—and it was extraordinary poetry.

Writing in English, or writing at all, was an unusual accomplishment, for very few Indian women in the nineteenth century learned English or other European languages. Not many were literate in any Indian language. Dutt’s poetry, however, was much more than a “first” for Indian women; it created a new idiom in Indian English verse.

Like Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s, Toru Dutt’s poems arose from a multilingual and cosmopolitan sensibility. Both poets brought together blended materials from the traditional tales and poetry of India with formal qualities from British and European poetic traditions. But in contrast to Michael’s ornate style and his turn to Bangla verse, Toru chose to write all the verse she had time to create in English. She possessed a strong lyric sensibility, as well as a technical facility for meter and lineation, and she brought to formal English verse a powerful idiomatic diction.

This sensibility owed much to Toru Dutt’s family background as well as to her education. She was born into a distinguished, if unusual, Bengali family, the youngest of three children. Two major events shaped her childhood: when she was six years old, her family converted to Christianity; and when she was eleven, the only son in the family, her fourteen-year-old brother, Abju, died.

Even before their religious conversion, the Dutts had been a westernized and very literary family. Toru’s father, Govin Chunder, her uncles Greece (Girish) Chunder and Hur Chunder, and her cousin Omesh collectively authored a volume, *The Dutt Family Album*, in 1870. Although this collection was not particularly well received, probably because the tide was already turning toward explicit nationalism, it indicates the Dutt family’s wide reading in European literatures. Toru and her siblings shared this literary culture. In her letters to her English

friend Mary Martin, Toru recounted reading *Paradise Lost* so often that she and her brother and sister learned the first book of Milton’s epic by heart.

Toru’s precocity and her extraordinary memory led her to serious study of languages. She was accomplished in French, the language of her one completed novel and the source language for many of her verse translations. She was fluent in English. She of course spoke Bangla and wrote it as well, and she was learning Sanskrit at the time of her death. That her father enabled both his daughters and his son to study intensively was in itself highly unusual. During their residence in England, Govin encouraged his daughters to attend the lectures for women at Cambridge University, something many a father—British or Indian—might have forbidden.

While one might educate one’s daughters and remain within the pale of Hindu society, conversion to Christianity was a different matter altogether. Conversion marked a drastic change for Govin’s extended family, most of whom, except his mother, were baptized with him. This step essentially made the Dutt family outcaste. They became socially unacceptable, no longer invited to dinner parties and other social events among their Hindu acquaintances. It is not surprising that shortly after their conversion Govin took his family to Bombay (now Mumbai) for a year. Not long after their return to Calcutta in 1864, Toru’s brother died, making more painful an already difficult situation.

In 1869, when Toru was thirteen, the Dutts traveled to France. Toru, Aru, and their mother were among the first Bengali upper-class women to travel abroad. After some months at school in a *pensionnat* in Nice, the girls moved with their parents to Cambridge, England, where the sisters continued their studies. Probably about this time, Toru and Aru began to think of themselves as writers, with Toru taking the lead in translating French romantic poetry. It is probable also that Aru contracted tuberculosis while at Cambridge, for the family removed to the British coast and some months later returned to Bengal, where the twenty-year-old Aru died in 1874.

After her brother’s and sister’s deaths, Toru became particularly close to her father. Clearly the two provided emotional and intellectual companionship for each other. Beginning in 1874, Toru published regularly in the *Bengal Magazine* and the *Calcutta Review*, including essays on Derozio and on Leconte de Lisle, the French Creole poet from Mauritius. The recent editor of her work, Chandani Lokugé, argues that both these essays reflect Toru’s interest in mediating between cultures, perhaps fueled by her sense of her own place as culturally double. Lokugé describes the poet as an exile in her own city. In fact, the Dutts spent much time at their country residence, Baugmauree, which formed Toru’s appreciation for nature and gave rise to some of her best-known poems.

In the three short years between her sister’s death and her own, Toru was often ill, reporting to a friend in 1877 that she had suffered with an unremitting cough for months. Yet in this period she published a volume of translations, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*, and completed enough original poetry for a second

volume; published posthumously as *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. She also wrote two novels—one in French, *Le journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers*, and one incomplete novel in English, *Bianca*—though she may have drafted these prose works during her years in Europe.

A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields was published first in Calcutta and then reprinted by Edmund Gosse in London. Gosse, who had a hand in publishing several Indian writers of English language poetry, first “discovered” Toru Dutt when he pulled her “thin and sallow packet with a wonderful Indian postmark” from the slush pile at the newspaper where he regularly reviewed books. This most “unattractive orange pamphlet” of verse, as Gosse called it, gave him a shock, “surprise and almost rapture” at the quality of the poetry. Gosse subsequently published a review of the volume and instigated the London publication of *Ancient Ballads and Legends* by Kegan Paul. To this volume, he attached a memoir of the poet. Gosse’s response to Toru Dutt was not unlike that of John Drinkwater Bethune to Michael Dutt, for he approved Toru’s “turning to the legends of her own race and country for inspiration.” In her poems on stories taken from the *Ramayana*, Gosse said, Toru Dutt seemed “to be chanting to herself those songs of her mother’s race to which she always turned with tears of pleasure.”

But of course, from Toru Dutt’s perspective, both her Anglicized father and her less Anglicized mother were of the same “race” as she, and her genius was to combine sources of inspiration. In this she resembled both Michael Dutt and Derozio and also her favorite English poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Indeed, the political engagement with European continental politics in a poem such as “France, 1870” strongly resembles Barrett Browning’s similar engagement with the Italian Risorgimento and with French politics. At the same time, it draws on a Calcutta tradition—the radical enthusiasm of men such as David Hare and Derozio for the project of the French Revolution.

Toru’s poems celebrating the natural world, including “The Lotus” and “Our Casuarina Tree,” are equally cosmopolitan, rewriting European precedents in a fully realized local context. The latter poem begins with a line that, as Lokugé shows, borrows from Milton’s description of Satan in *Paradise Lost*; it is equally inspired by Wordsworth’s poem “Yew Trees.” Similarly, in “The Lotus,” Lokugé identifies precedents in William Cowper’s poem “The Lily and the Rose” as well as “The Indian Passion Flower” from *The Dutt Family Album*. Among the ballads and legends, the most intimate poem, “Sita,” borrows from Pope’s “Windsor Forest” for its allusion to the peacock “whirring from the brake.” In each of these instances, Toru Dutt melds traditions, using her broad reading to increase the range of comparison and at the same time integrating allusions in a lyrical voice all her own.

One of Toru Dutt’s last poems perhaps best captures the complexity of her lyric voice. In “The Tree of Life,” she has a vision of an angel who relieves her pain and fever and binds her brows with sprays of silver and gold. At once a premonition of death and a vision of the poet crowned with laurel, and hence im-

mortalized, “The Tree of Life” creates a delicate emotional balance. It vindicates the young poet’s vocation and at the same time suggests the emotional debt to her father and caretaker; her father, himself a poet, is refused the crown, though whether this is because he will outlive his child or because his talents lie in family life rather than in art is left unclear. The straightforward diction and the careful pentameter of “The Tree of Life” create a poem of understated power.

Not long after completing this poem, on August 30, 1877, Toru Dutt died of tuberculosis. She is buried in the Church Missionary Society Cemetery in Calcutta.

Sources

- Toru Dutt, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (Bhowanipore: Saptahik Sambad Press, 1876); Dutt, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1882). See also Edmund Gosse, preface to Dutt, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*; Harihar Das and H. A. L. Fisher, *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921); and Chandani Lokugé, ed., *Toru Dutt: Collected Prose and Poetry* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Sita

Three happy children in a darkened room!
 What do they gaze on with wide-open eyes?
 A dense, dense forest, where no sunbeam pries,
 And in its centre a cleared spot.—There bloom
 Gigantic flowers on creepers that embrace 5
 Tall trees; there, in a quiet lucid lake
 The white swans glide; there, “whirring from the brake,”
 The peacock springs; there, herds of wild deer race;
 There, patches gleam with yellow waving grain;
 There, blue smoke from strange altars rises light, 10
 There, dwells in peace, the poet-anchorite.
 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. 15
 It is an old, old story, and the lay
 Which has evoked sad Sita² 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! 20
 When shall those children by their mother’s side
 Gather, ah me! as erst at eventide?