

Toru Dutt as a Poet

Introduction

Toru Dutt (Bengali: তরু দত্ত; 4 March 1856 – 30 August 1877) was an Indian Bengali translator and poet from British India, who wrote in English and French. She is among the founding figures of Indo-Anglian Literature, alongside Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809–1831), Manmohan Ghose (1869–1924), and Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949). She is known for her volumes of poetry in English, *Sita, A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876) and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882), and for a novel in French, *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* (1879). Her poems explore themes of loneliness, longing, patriotism and nostalgia. Dutt died at the age of 21.

Analysis

Toru Dutt or Tarulatha Dutt was an Indian poet born in the Bengal province in 1856 to the well-known Rambagan Dutt family. As the youngest child of Govin Chandra Dutt and Kshetramoni Mitter, Toru belonged to a family of writers. Her father Govind Chunder Dutt, who was an employee of the Government of India, was a linguist and also published some poems. Her mother, Kshetramoni Mitter, was a woman who loved Hindu mythology and translated the book *The Blood of Christ* into Bengali. Because of her father's governmental employment, the family traveled frequently.

In 1862, her family embraced Christianity and was baptized. Toru was only six at the time, and this was a major event in her life. Though she remained a devout Christian all her life, the Hindu system of belief never lost its sheen with her, and its influence can be seen in most of her works. After being met with social rejection and isolation as a result of their conversion to Christianity, Toru Dutt's family moved to Mumbai for a year. Upon returning in 1864 to their home of Calcutta, Toru's brother Abju died of consumption.

Her family moved to France in 1869, following the death of her brother Abju. In France, she was educated in language, history, and the arts. Toru, along with her sister Aru, mastered the French language during their short stay in France. This fascination with the French language and culture would be sustained through Toru's life, and her favorite authors were the French writers Victor Hugo and Pierre-Jean de Béranger.

Sometime later, the family moved to Britain, where Toru pursued her education at the University of Cambridge, along with her higher French studies. The pastoral landscapes of southern England, combined with Toru's experiences growing up on her family's country estate in Baugmauree, played a large role in

shaping her personal and poetic fascination with the natural world. It was also at Cambridge that Toru met and befriended Mary Martin. Their correspondence lasted even after the family returned to Bengal in 1873. Later on, these letters became a major source of information about Toru's life.

Toru started publishing her work when she was only 18 years old. Her first published works, essays on Henry Derozio and Leconte de Lisle, appeared in *Bengal Magazine* in 1874, and in this same year, Toru's sister Aru passed away from consumption. The multinational and interracial backgrounds of these poets (Derozio was of Anglo-Portuguese descent and born in India, while Leconte de Lisle was mixed race and born in Mauritius) were of interest to Toru, who herself felt a mix of national influence both as an Indian Christian and during her time abroad. Her first novel *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* (*The Diary of Mademoiselle D'Arvers*) was written in French. She also started to write another novel, *Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden*, which remains incomplete due to her young and untimely death. Both these novels were set outside of India with non-Indian protagonists.

Despite beginning her literary career with prose, Toru Dutt is known for her poetry. Her first collection, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*, was a volume of French poems that she and her deceased sister Aru translated into English. The first edition of her book was published in 1876 by the Saptahik Sambad Press, located in Bhowanipore, India. This collection of poetry earned Toru some recognition as young, rising poet. At first her collection was not a hit, because it lacked a preface, was printed on low-quality paper, and the publisher was little known. However, in 1877 the poetry collection gained publicity after it was favorably reviewed in *The Examiner* by Edmund Gosse.

Sadly, Toru Dutt did not live to see her success. She, like her siblings, died from consumption in 1877, at the age of 21. Her book of poetry named *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, a collection of translations and adaptations from Sanskrit literature, was published posthumously in 1882. Edmund Gosse wrote the introductory memoir for the collection. He said, describing Toru, "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." Her more popular poems include "Sîta," "The Lotus," "Lakshman," "Our Casuarina Tree," "The Tree of Life," and "Buttoo."

In the early twentieth century, author Harihar Das came across "Buttoo." He was so taken with the poem that he set out to find out more about Toru. After failing to discover much information about her, he decided to write a Toru Dutt biography himself. He got in touch with her remaining family, and with Mary Martin, who provided him with her letters from Toru. In 1921 he published his biography, *Life And Letters Of Toru Dutt*.

In spite of her untimely death, Toru Dutt remains an exemplary poet, and her works are widely regarded as being among the best of Indian-English writings.

In particular, critics have paid much attention to Toru Dutt's lyric focus on the complexity of individual emotions, especially in light of her mixed religious heritage and her encounters with death from a young age. Much critical attention has also been paid to Toru Dutt's successful combination of European and Indian cultural influences, linking her identity as a cosmopolitan and multicultural figure to her poetic synthesis of English verse forms (such as the ballad) with Indian inspirations and legends.

Note: All these notes have been compiled from open sources on the Internet.