

DEATH AND DESPAIR IN THE POETRY OF TORU DUTT

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Abstract: Compared to the short time that she lived Toru Dutt's literary output as a poet was prodigious. Her yearning for the past and her deep sense of many faceted losses are apparent in her poetry. The evocative acceptance of approaching death in one so young presents a picture of a girl mature beyond her years. A study of her poetry reveals her close affinity with the Romantic poets. Referring to various poems of Toru Dutt, the paper studies the role that religion, and her interpretation of religion/s she was exposed to, has to play in this embracing of the inevitability of fate. This paper analyses the reasons for the presence of the elements of death, despair, nostalgia and a yearning for the past and the role that religion plays in her acceptance of the inevitability of death in the poetry of Toru Dutt. Through a critical examination of various poems, the paper tries to uncover the beautiful interplay of memories of past experiences, stories heard long ago and the moments in the present in Dutt's poetry. It traces the journey of the poet from her exposure to death, to a questioning of death, its nature and the forms it might take, to the final acceptance of death as something as inevitable and precious as love.

Key words: Toru Dutt, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, Religion, Death, Nostalgia

Abstrak: Meskipun masa hidupnya singkat, hasil karya sastra Toru Dutt sebagai penyair terbilang luar biasa. Kerinduan akan masa yang sudah terlewati dan perasaannya yang dalam mengenai kehilangan-kehilangan dalam hidup nampak dalam karya puisinya. Kepasrahannya menerima kematian yang mendekat menyiratkan tingkat kematangan seseorang yang jauh melampaui usia mudanya.

Penelitian tentang karya puisinya membuktikan kemiripannya dengan para penyair periode Romantik. Tulisan ini membahas beberapa karya Tora Dutt dalam kaitannya dengan peran agama dan penafsirannya terhadap agama yang dikenalnya dalam persiapan dirinya menerima keniscayaan nasib. Tulisan ini menganalisa alasan hadirnya unsur-unsur kematian, rasa putus asa, nostalgia dan kerinduan akan masa lampau, dan peran agama dalam mempersiapkannya menerima kepastian kematian dalam puisi-puisi Tora Dutt. Melalui kajian kritis terhadap beberapa puisinya, tulisan ini berusaha mengungkap kelindan yang indah dari kenangan-kenangan masa lalu, kisah-kisah yang pernah terdengar dan peristiwa-peristiwa dalam kekinian sang penyair. Tulisan ini mencermati perjalanan sang penyair mulai dari awal pengetahuannya tentang kematiannya sendiri yang mendekat, pergolakannya tentang kematian, arti hakiki dan bentuk kematian, sampai pada kepasrahannya untuk menerima kematian sebagai sesuatu yang niscaya dan berharga layaknya cinta itu

Kata kunci: Toru Dutt, Balade Kuno, Legenda Hindustan, Agama, Kematian, Nostalgia

INTRODUCTION

The year 1857 proved to be the one of turmoil and turbulence in the history of colonial India and Britain alike. It was the year when Indian soldiers revolted against their colonial British masters in north India in an effort to regain their freedom. Though unsuccessful, this revolt remained seared in the memory of both the colonizer and the colonized because of its unexpectedness for the former and its ruthless suppression for the latter. One of the earliest Indian (women) poets writing in English was born during such a time of ferment and tumult. However, despite having been born during such turbulent times, Toru Dutt's poetry makes no mention of these tumultuous happenings. This exclusion is quite important because Toru Dutt was the representative woman voice from the India of the times. Instead she turns inwards. She gives voice to her personal grief and like the Romantics, turns to religion, ancient tales and nature to deal with personal losses. She is quite apolitical in her poetic expressions. Toru Dutt, though born a Hindu, died a Christian. It is this short journey of hers (for she died very young at the age of twenty-one and a half) that traverses and negotiates not only two religions (Hinduism to Christianity) but also two languages (Sanskrit to English) that this paper studies. This paper critically examines

this inward turn in the poetry of Toru Dutt and studies the elements of death and despair in her poetry within the context of her religious journey. By closely analyzing some of the poems like *Sita*, *Savitri*, *Jogadhya Uma*, *My Vocation*, etc. the paper traces the strain of nostalgia and melancholy for times gone, and people departed.

INFLUENCES

The youngest in a family of intellectuals, Toru Dutt had early introduction to the tragedies of life. She was born to Hindu parents who converted to Christianity when she was very young, and the acquired religion is supposed to have helped her bear the deaths of her brother and sister better. This paper sets out to refute this argument by showing that though acquainted with personal grief, it was her immersion in the ancient tales from *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, for which she learnt Sanskrit language to translate them into English that helped her bear the grief of lost siblings and consequent loneliness. Though she converted to Christianity at a young age and later visited France, Italy and England to experience the life and cultures she had come to know and cherish through books, she had recourse only to Hindu scriptures or the stories therein, at the time when she was loneliest in her short life. Edmund Gosse writes in his introduction to her *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, "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..." (Dutt, 1885, p. 24). Despite assertions about her mellifluous and graceful poems, Gosse's introduction to the original publication of this volume highlights her lack of mastery over the English language, distance from British thinking or way of life, and her affinity to her Indian roots and her immersion in the religion of her mother.

Toru Dutt's posthumously published *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustanis* a collection of poems that are her interpretative translations of various stories from mythologies that her mother used to tell her and her siblings. This paper looks at the theme of death and despair that forms an undercurrent in Toru's poetry from this collection, and a couple of other poems. These were written at a time when she was alone, her siblings were dead and she herself was in the clutches of tuberculosis, to which she was about to succumb. This absorption in writing poetry dealing with the stories from the religious epics and scriptures helped her emotionally deal with their

deaths as well as her own illness. Upon reading her poems it appears as if she also had some intuition about her own impending death. There is a lament in some of her poems, which is hard to miss.

DISCORDANT NOTES: HOPE AND DESPAIR

The small volume *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, published after Toru Dutt's death contains Toru's rendering of tales from scriptures that she had heard from her mother. It comprises of the poems based on legends about *Savitri*, *Lakshman*, *Buttoo*, *Sindhur*, *Prehlad*, *Jogadhya Uma*, *The Royal Ascetic and the Hind*, *The Legend of Dhruv* and *Sita*. Though gleaned from Sanskrit sources, and based on her mother's recital, Toru has given them a modern touch with her poetic gift and critical questioning.

Fate, and its unalterable working, destiny and karma along with the inevitability of death are alluded to in these poems. In the various poems where death has been written about in this collection, it is shown to be unlike its popular perception of something that evokes fear and terror. Death is portrayed as gentle, noble and royal. It is supposed to in still truth and is likened to love. It appears as if Toru has accepted the inevitability of fate and looks forward to death not as a fearful event but as something that provides release to the soul. An analysis of these poems reveals that she has been able to think of her own impending death calmly because of her exposure to and understanding of the idea of death from her mother's rendition of tales from the Hindu epics. Various modern psychological studies² have focused on the role of religion and spirituality for well being, and they can be applied to Toru's religious understanding and acceptance of death as inevitable, and the reflection of the same in her poetry, to the extent that the angel of death appears to bring peace and calm rather than fear (*Tree of Life*). "R(eligion/) S(pirituality) factors appear to be associated with physical and overall health" contend Thoresen and Harris (Thoresen and Harris, 2003, p. 11) in a study where they have concluded that there are links between religion and overall improvement in health and well being though complete cure might be difficult.

²Powell, L. H., Shahabi, L. and Thoresen, C. E. (2003, January). *Religion and spirituality: linkages to physical health*. *American Psychologist*, 58 (1), 36-52

Seeman, T. E., Dubin, L. F., and Seeman, M. (2003, January). *Religiosity/spirituality and health: a critical review of the evidence for biological pathways*. *American Psychologist* 58, (1) 53-63.

Toru had an early firm belief in the goodness of Christianity and the backwardness of Hinduism. She identified with the French and the British way of life and culture because of her exposure to them through books. However, her mother used to tell Toru and her siblings stories from Hindu scriptures when they were kids. These were tales of fortitude in the face of overwhelming odds, like a woman's victory over death for her husband's life (*Savitri*), an abandoned woman's fight against heavy odds to bring up her children alone (*Sita*), etc. Unable to find acceptance in either the British society of Calcutta of the times or the Indian society, as an adult she turned to these stories for companionship. This appears to have helped Toru accept the death of her siblings as well as deal with her own increasing sickness and fast approaching death as the analysis that follows shows. She wrote poems (published posthumously) based on her critical understanding of these stories. She has beautifully portrayed those happy childhood days of hers in *Our Casuarina Tree*.

HIGH VOCATION

Written in 1869 the poem *My Vocation* is one such poem. Written in first person, the poem is a mournful song about the limitations the poetess faces. Loneliness surrounds her and rejection abounds because of her sickness and the resultant ugliness. In reply to the poet's lamentations and questions, God repeatedly tells her to "Sing...Chant poor little thing" (*My Vocation*). The vivid image drawn is of a little, helpless and anguished creature that has no youth or beauty and has nothing to look forward to as well. She repeatedly questions God about what to do and how to bear her lot, and is answered in a refrain by Him that she must sing and chant. She must finish the heavy task of writing poetry, her only duty, which is both a consolation and the reward for the unhappy fate that has been dealt to her. Repeatedly she is "(A) waif on this earth/ Sick, ugly and small/ Contemned from my birth/And rejected by all," (*My Vocation*) a bird with clipped wings who instead of living is headed towards death. Love does provide a glimmer of hope for the poor little thing, but it has also fled, leaving her alone and condemned, to fulfill her task of writing poetry before death lays claim to her.

Toru has chosen words like "waif", "sick", "ugly", etc. that reflect the poignant state of her mind. In succeeding stanzas she builds up this image of loneliness, anguish, despair and lament at her pathetic condition. Wealth has besmeared the persona in the poem with dirt, servants of power have

insulted and jeered at her, life frightens her by its “chances and pain,” and even though love did come as a ray in the morning, it has now run away, and she is left sighing since she has neither youth nor beauty. She seeks hard for love and comfort but is unable to find either. In order to drive home this anguish, Toru builds up the image of a caged bird whose wings have been clipped and who has nowhere to fly to. The only solace for her is her poetry, which is undoubtedly a high vocation, and her only request is that it be given a “kindly thought.”

Of much interest is the depiction of death in *Savitri*. A poem about a woman who follows and reasons with Death to save her husband, and ultimately succeeds in doing so, *Savitri* portrays Death as the king of Gods, who wears a crown on his head and holds royal court. In the poem, Savitri knows about her husband’s approaching death but cannot do anything to avert it. Again Toru brings the idea of karma into the poem while talking about death, “his sins are facts.../and he must bear their consequence” (Dutt, 1885, p. 68). The poet here contends that everybody has been ordained to die at a certain time and none escapes that time. Death has also been bound by Fate to do his duty of claiming souls. Death does claim his soul till forced to give up by Savitri. Toru seems to have understood the true nature of life in this world where no one can have everything that one desires, and everyone must bear his burden alone to the last. Contrary to the popular notion of Death being uncouth and terrible, here his face is “irradiate, and yet severe,” his eyes show love as well as dignity, and “glowed so bright, they filled with fear” (Dutt, 1885, p. 63). Death has a noble face, is shown to be “the man with glory on his kingly brow,” is fair, is the only God who conquers men “by patience, kindness, mercy, love,” (Dutt, 1885, pp. 72, 78) and would have been hailed as “light” only if the people knew about his true nature. Death is *Yama* the conqueror who men follow against their will. He is the one who knows the nature of truth. When Savitri has won over death, Toru, in one of the most striking images in the poem writes “Death was Love” and love is either life or “silent slow despair” (Dutt, 1885, pp. 76, 35) i.e. death. This is what she says of death and fate in *Savitri*, “Can man balk Fate, or break its chain?.../If Fate so rules.../Unequal seems to be a strife,/Between Humanity and Fate;/Death comes to all or soon or late;/With unseen hands Fate draws us on/Unto the place appointed us;/We feel no outward force.” (*Savitri*) (Dutt, 1885, p. 55)

Death is gentle and kind in another poem of Toru’s called *Sindhu*, a tale from *Ramayana*, “Death gently came and placed a crown/Upon each reverend head” (Dutt, 1885, p. 169). Though a subtle sadness can be felt

throughout the poetry of Toru Dutt, perhaps a lament for the beloved sister now lost, a longing for the shared times, nostalgia and hankering for the past, a cry of despair at the unkind fate, there is never a sense of resignation or surrender. Death is accepted as inevitable, someone “who spareth none.” It is benevolent and considerate. Toru appears to have no grudges against either fate or death and has acknowledged their definiteness. And this increasing acceptance is the result of exposure to these various stories of determination and resilience from Hindu scriptures. Having understood the nature of death, she keeps working at her given vocation, doing her duty, “Virtue should be the aim and end/Of every life, all else is vain./Duty should be its dearest friend/If higher life it would attain” (*Savitri*) (Dutt, 1885, p. 69).

Similar images of yearning sadness and lament are seen in another poem, *Our Casuarina Tree*. Toru remembers the tree under whose shade she and her siblings used to play. Her beautiful descriptions of the garden and the tree have all the nostalgia that she felt upon remembering it when she was away in France and England. On the surface, the tree is a picture of song, play and activity all day, birds, animals and children all come to sit and play on it. It is dear to Toru because it reminds her of her happy days of childhood which are now gone forever. Even the tree misses those days of laughter and song, it “murmurs” and “wails” in a plaintive “eerie speech” that with luck reaches Toru across the seven seas, “What is that dirge-like murmur that I hear/Like the sea breaking on a shingle-beach?” (Dutt, 1885, p. 214). Toru dwells upon the fond yet painful memories of her departed siblings who were her companions in their jaunts around the Casuarina tree. In wishing the tree a long life in her verse, she appears to have an uncanny inkling of her own approaching death. She writes, “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!/Mayst thou be numbered when my days are done.../May Love defend thee from Oblivion’s curse” (*Our Casuarina Tree*) (Dutt, 1885, p. 216). Death is but “skeleton” and time is just “shadow” according to Toru in this poem. She is influenced by romantics like Wordsworth, whom she recalls in this poem by mentioning the immortal yew trees of Borrowdale. However joyful the song may be, by invoking these immortal trees of Wordsworth that also grow near cemeteries, as if mocking the short life of the humans, and are sometimes supposed to be the heralds of death, Toru seems to be thinking about the death of her loved ones as well as her own illness.

Sita is another beautiful lyric where the sense of nostalgia, sadness and longing for the past is an unmistakable presence. The poem again harks back to those days when Toru's mother used to tell three wide-eyes children (her and her brother and sister) stories from the Hindu myths. She was a powerful storyteller who could so vividly and evocatively portray the images that they could be *seen* and *felt* by the three of them and they would cry and laugh with the falling or rising fortunes of the people inhabiting those stories. Toru is no less in conjuring up the scenes from those story-telling days of her mother, for the lyric appears to give an experience of watching a motion picture. The images of flowers in bloom, placid lake, peacocks and deer, and the grief-stricken figure of Sita, that in turn give joy and bring tears to the eyes of three young children, are beautifully drawn by Toru. There is an aura of haunting sadness at passing by of those happy times, as well as a hankering for those moments with her siblings. "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.../ When shall those children by their mother's side..."(*Sita*) (Dutt, 1885, p. 194). Same nostalgia and love for the mother is heard in another poem *Jogadhya Uma*, another poem rooted in the Indian tradition and lore. "Absurd may be the tale I tell,.../ I loved the lips from which it fell,/ So let it stand among my rhymes" (*Jogadhya Uma*) (Dutt, 1885, pp. 112-113).

The Tree of Life perhaps deals with her own advanced illness, and her inkling of the rapidly approaching death. According to her father, this poem was inspired by an incident in Toru's life. The poem conjures up the image of a beatific angel, who touches the extremely sick Toru, and relieves her of her pain. Apparently it is the angel of death, for her time of death is drawing near. The angel's presence is a soothing one since Toru has come to accept the inevitability of death; a sentiment expressed in her other poems as well. It is a merciful angel and will bring her the much-needed relief from pain. Though the tree from which the angel plucks the leaves to touch Toru's brow is *the tree of life*, yet for her perhaps it is the promise of the painless and peaceful *death* and *after-life* that is more important. When asked to touch and bind the father with the self same calming leaves, the angel declines to do so, for the father has yet to live some more.

According to Toru's belief, death in time claims everyone, it "spareth none" a sentiment that is echoed in *The Royal Ascetic and the Hind*. It is her belief that comes across in poem after poem that peace or God can be attained only by doing the duty "...in the heat and bustle of the world,/Mid sorrow, sickness, suffering and sin,/Must he still labour with a loving soul,"

(*The Royal Ascetic and the Hind*) (Dutt, 1885, p. 122) which is an iteration of her sentiments in *My Vocation*. Death is personified in most of Toru's poems. From the analysis it is clear that according to Toru the only other thing that survives in front of it or in spite of it is love. *Prehlad* has a beautiful paean to the ever changing and patient Time. Again personified, time is something that remains constant and yet changes everything else, "Time changes deserts bare to meads,/ And fertile meads to deserts bare,/ Cities to pools, and pools with reeds/ To towns and cities large and fair./ Time changes purple into rags,/ And rags to purple. Chime by chime,/ Whether it flies, or runs, or drags—/ The wise wait patiently on Time" (*Prehlad*) (Dutt, 1885, p. 174). Despite limitations of her poetic technique, Toru shows maturity of thought beyond her twenty-one years in her thought and writing.

CONCLUSION

Toru mourns not only the passing away of the people and the times but also love. Death, time, and love have been repeatedly personified in her poems. In the later poems, Toru writes about the workings of fate, and the helplessness of humans and gods alike. Even death cannot change the workings of the fate. Similar is the case with love. Though love can be the only survivor in the face of death, it is ephemeral in nature, and depends on the workings of fate and chance. The persistent elegiac note in her poetry does not jar only because she infuses most of these stories with beautiful nature descriptions and her modern critical thinking.

Since Toru died too early, and since these poems were published posthumously, what is missed most by a discerning reader is what has been lost by her premature death. It would have been very interesting to trace the development of her thought from exposure to the death and accompanying grief in life, to the acknowledgment of tragedies of life and finally overcoming fate (which have been analyzed in this paper) to what could have been the further development of her thought had she lived longer, and written more. These elements of her poetry – beautiful descriptions of nature, palpable imagery, nostalgia for things, times and people long gone, and the acceptance of the inevitability of fate and ever-marching time that infuse her poetry with heartache and the note of heart-rending despair and forlornness – help in overcoming the shortcomings of her still developing poetic technique. There is a critical note in her poetry when she writes about the condition of women (e.g. the mention of oppression and *zenana* (women quarters in a house) in *Savitri*) in general, which is modern in its sensibilities

and much ahead of its times. She could also hardly relate to anybody around her because of her exposure to French and British education, but she was very rooted in her Indian traditions. There is hardly any mention of the faith she had converted to, instead it is her mother's faith that helps her deal with the misfortunes of life. What is most interesting is that hardly any of her posthumously printed poems have a hint of her adopted religion while most of them deal with her birth religion, and the understanding about life and lessons she has drawn from it. It was her immersion in these stories that helped her overcome loneliness, pain, sorrow and suffering. They provided her the companionship that she sorely missed in her life otherwise. To end with words of Gosse (who is otherwise racist and patronizing), "(S)he 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..." (Dutt, 1885, p. 12)

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The logo for the journal 'Celt' is centered on the page. It features the word 'Celt' in a light blue, rounded, sans-serif font. The letters have a white outline and a slight drop shadow, giving them a three-dimensional appearance. The 'C' is the largest, followed by 'e', 'l', and 't'.