CHAPTER 4

Mouthpiece of India
In order to fully appreciate the works of an artist, it is of utmost value to be acquainted with the culture which created the artist. Toru Dutt is a genuine representative of Indian culture, which is an assimilative one. Indian culture as we know toady, is an assimilation of a large number of cultural influences which have flowed in over the centuries in the Indian sub-continent, and commingled with the indigenous culture to create an integrated fabric of extravagant variety and richness. It is in this context of fusion and creation that we need to consider the life and works of Toru Dutt. In this regard, the following comment by a critic needs reassessment:

All her writings, except perhaps only one Bengali letter extant in her own handwriting, are either in English or French. This bilingual spirit adds to her tragedy of being in a way outlandish as well as almost forsaken. If she deserves to be rescued from oblivion—which she really does—it must be a careful task for the rescuer; for he would find that Toru herself chose an alien soil twice removed from her original motherland.¹

To counter the above statement, it only needs to be pointed out that the "bilingual spirit" of which the critic speaks of, instead of making Toru "outlandish" and "forsaken," actually reveals to us a new dimension of her personality which is closely connected with the unique nature of Indian culture. Toru is in fact, the reiteration of the age old saying, "the world is a family." In this family, there are a few such personality like Toru Dutt, whose roots spread far and wide, in nations
both foreign and one's own, draw sustenance from both, and reveal to us the true
meaning of universal brotherhood. In both her writings—French and English,
Toru sought to reveal the universal soul of man, and at the same time,
expounded the timeless philosophy of her motherland.

4.1 Sources of Poetic Outlook—Personal Grief

Toru's outlook upon life had been largely melancholic. The chief reason for
this was that she witnessed a number of tragedies at home at a young age; she
was also besieged with ill-health, pain and suffering, all through her short life.
Toru's brother Abju died in 1865, plunging the entire family into grief. Thereafter,
Aru, her sister and companion in literary forages, succumbed to consumption in
1874. This left the sensitive poetess gloomy and companionless. After Aru's
death, Toru wrote to her friend Mary Martin, "We feel lonely without her, who was
the life of our small family. She was so cheerful and happy always. Think of us
sometimes, dear." And again, "Aru's was such a lively and merry disposition, that
she seemed to fill all the large Garden House with life and animation.—Now,
without her, the place seems so lifeless and deserted that Mamma can hardly
bear going there. We are thinking of disposing of it, if we go to England [. . .]."² By
and by, her own health ran down owing to recurrent attacks of fever and cough
spasms; she spat blood and lay weak and prostrate, and was compelled to keep
indoors. A distressing tale indeed, and so it is not surprising that she could relate
to pain and suffering of the humankind more than she could with joyful
celebrations and comedies.

Toru's poetic compositions—A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields, and
Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan, as well as her novels, Le Journal,

Oh Death, thou canst wait; leave, leave me to dream,
And strike at the hearts when despair is supreme,
And shame hails thy dart as a boon!
For me Dales has arbours unknown to the throngs,
The world has delights, the Muses have songs,
I wish not to perish too soon.³

The poem "My Vocation" is profoundly touching, and though it is only a translation, it carries an intense personal tone. Quoted below are the first and the last stanza to reiterate the point:

A waif on this earth,
Sick, ugly and small,
Contemned from my birth,
And rejected by all,
From my lips broke a cry,
Such as anguish may wring.
Sing,—said God in reply,

Chant poor little thing.

All men have a task,

And to sing is my lot—

No meed from men I ask

But one kindly thought.

My vocation is high—

'Mid the glasses that ring,

Still—still comes that reply,

Chant poor little thing.

Lonely life of the poetess, her frail health and small frame, and her dejection are well captured in the poem. Here, "The Death of a Daughter" may be quoted in full before continuing with discussion on personal elements in Toru's poetry:

Oh, I was wild like a mad man at first,

Three days I wept bitter tears and accurst;

O those whom God of your hope hath bereft!

Fathers and mothers like me lonely left!

Have ye felt what I felt, and known it all?

And longed to dash your heads on the wall?

Have you been like me in open revolt,

And defied the Hand that hurled the bolt?

Does God permit such misfortune, nor care

That our souls be filled with utter despair?
It seemed as the whole were a frightful dream,
She could not have left me thus like a fleam;
Ha! that is her laughter in the next room!
Oh no, she cannot be dead in the tomb,
There shall she enter,—come here by this door,
And her step shall be music to me as before.

Oh! how oft have I said,—silence,—she speaks,
Hold,—’tis her hand on the key, and it creaks,
Wait,—she comes!—I hear,—leave me,—go out,
For she is in this mansion, somewhere without doubt.\(^6\)

It is a heart rending poem; the father is unable to sustain the loss of his daughter and cries out in anguish. The poem is almost an echo of Govin Chunder’s sentiments after the death of Toru as we can see in his letters addressed to Miss Mary Martin; he wrote:

Why should these three young lives, [Abju, Aru, and Toru] so full of hope and work, be cut short, while I, old and almost infirm, linger on? I think I can dimly see that there is a fitness, a preparation required for the life beyond, which they had, and I have not. One day I shall see it all clearly. Blessed be the Lord. His will be done.\(^6\)

And then sometime afterwards:

Mrs. Dutt and I find it very difficult to drag on our chain, now that the sunshine of our house is gone. But the Lord will send me and her both rest and deliverance in His own good time. You are always in our hearts and in our prayers.\(^7\)
As is the Sheaf, the Ancient Ballads too is a collection of verses charged with intense sentiments—Joy and pathos, anger and sorrow, hope and dejection; all find eloquent expression in it. Here too, Toru shows her preference for the pathetic and the gloom laden. Thus, in "Savitri" we have a number of passages steeped in misery; one of which is quoted for sake of reference:

And yet there was a sceptre grim,

A skeleton in Savitri's heart,

Looming in shadow, somewhat dim,

But which would never thence depart.

It was that fatal, fatal speech

Of Narad Muni. As the days
Slip smoothly past, each after each,

In private she more fervent prays.

But there is none to share her fears,

For how could she communicate

The sad cause of her hidden tears? (p. 11)

Then, we have the taunts and lacerating words of Sita addressed to Lakshman:

"He perishes — well, let him die!

His wife henceforth shall be mine own!

Can that thought deep imbedded lie

Within thy heart's most secret zone!

Search well and see! One brother takes

His kingdom, — one would take his wife!

A fair partition! — But it makes

Me shudder, and abhor my life. (p. 31)
From every line of the passage anger and scorn leaps up, and we can picture Sita driven with grief and transformed from the dignified queen of great patience and humility, into a vicious woman who turned on the one who only sought to console. In "The Legend of Dhruva," we witness the fierce determination of the young child, who on being denied the love of his father— the king leaves the palace for good in search for glory unattainable by his father or his step-brother:

Let Uttama my brother, — not thy son, —
Receive the throne and royal titles, — all
My father pleases to confer on him.
I grudge them not. Not with another's gifts
Desire I, dearest mother, to be rich,
But with my own work would acquire a name. (pp. 48-49)

In Buttoo we have the hunter child, who was made to pay a "sad recompense" by the conceited master. "Sindhu" is a deeply touching story of the death of the only child of an old sage couple, resulting in their piteous end, and finally, in "Sita," mythical past is resurrected by lively imagination of the poetess. The ancient past commingle with childhood days of the poetess and the two merge imperceptibly as to create a picture in the reader's mind, a picture which the reader can visualise with a sense of déjà vu. Taking into account the poems discussed so far, we can surmise that notes of frustration, loneliness, and longing are predominant in Toru's poetry. As calamity repeatedly struck the Dutt family, Toru was sucked deeper and deeper into the world of shadow and gloom. She waged a grim, heroic battle against the pestilence which had earlier claimed the lives of her elder siblings, but in the end, she too succumbed to it.
4.2 Sources of Poetic Outlook—Christian Theology

Apart from tragedies, a number of other upheavals in the family life also shaped Toru's vision of life. As already noted, the family embraced Christianity in 1862, this resulted in discontentment between Toru's parents, Toru's mother being a devout Hindu lady. It was at such a critical moment of the family, that Govin Chunder wrote "The Hindu Convert to his Wife," a beseeching poem addressed to his wife:

Nay, part not so—one moment stay,
Repel me not with scorn.
Like others, wilt thou turn away,
And leave me quite forlorn?
Wilt thou too join the scoffing crowd,
The cold, the heartless, and the proud,
Who curse the hallowed morn
When daring idols to disown,
I knelt before the Saviour's throne?\(^8\)

Persuasions of this kind had the desired effect on Kshetramoni Dutt and she realigned herself in the framework of new faith and changed circumstances resulting thereof. Later, Mrs. Dutt became proficient in English and translated into Bengali a book titled The Blood of Jesus. She was a philanthropic lady who left a handsome contribution towards the building of the Oxford Mission Church at Barisal, one of the finest in Bengal. Govin Chunder Dutt, himself wrote a good many poems, a number of which appeared in The Dutt Family Album (1870). His poems are mostly didactic in character, dealing with the mysteries of life and death, secrets of after-life and glory of God; written from a Christian point of view.
Born in such a family, Toru, along with other children of the Dutt family made the holy Bible the main prop of her life. She had unwavering faith in God, in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit; she went to Church as a matter of regular course. Before the family's departure for Europe, Toru also played harmonium at the local Church.9 Full of Christian piety, Toru loved her relations and often wished if only they had converted to Christianity. In one of her letters to Mary Martin, she writes, “I wish you knew her: [grandmother] she is, I am sad to say, still a Hindu, but she is so gentle and loves us so much. She had many children, but now only Mamma and Mamma's brother are living.”10 On her death, Toru's last rites were conducted according to Christian traditions. Conveying the news to Mary Martin, Govin Chunder wrote, “Toru has passed from the earth. [. . .] and her end was perfect peace.”11 She was buried in the C.M.S. Cemetery, Upper Circular Road, Calcutta, by the side of her dear brother and sister. On her headstone appears the following inscription:

TORU DUTT

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER OF

GOVIN CHUNDER DUTT,

BORN 4 MARCH, 1856,

DIED 30th AUGUST, 1877.

Be Thou Faithful Unto Death And I
Will Give Thee A Crown Of Life.

Rev. ii. 10.12

These particulars from Toru's life can help understand the process of assimilation as a result of her twin orientations; born in a Hindu family, which later shifted its
loyalty to Christianity, Toru remained a staunch follower of her adopted faith to the end of her days. The life of Toru Dutt is a fine example of synthesis of the East and the West, the indigenous and the foreign; in a way, she is the true representative of modern India.

As regards her poetry, A Sheaf though is a work of translation, yet it is a statement of faith. She was guided by a sense of morality, aesthetics, and style in her reading and in her translation. To better understand the statement, it will be useful to reproduce her opinion on the subject in her letter to Miss Martin:

I can recommend you several good French poets, modern or ancient, but you must not read all their poetry, for they are sometimes very loose and vulgar. Lamartine is always to be trusted. Victor Hugo's poems have nothing very bad in them, as far as I know, though there are few rather bad ones; his recent works are better. Then there is Beranger, but you must be very particular about reading his good ones, for he and Musset, though both were greatly talented and full of genius, are often, sad to say, immoral. Vigny, too, is not always what his Moise would seem to indicate, his Le Cor is splendid. Then there is a host of rising and living poets, first of whom is Theuriet, then there is Leconte de Lisle, Baudelaire, Augier, Autran, &c.\(^\text{13}\)

As can be inferred, Toru chose for her translation poems which she considered good—good not only aesthetically, but also morally and ethically. Thus, in her work she held on to the criteria of morality, lyricism, pathos, nature descriptions, and style. She had a mind preoccupied with religiosity and hence her liking for Lamartine, whose mind she says, is "essentially religious,"\(^\text{14}\) and so was Laprade.
Louis Ratisbonne's sonnet "The Miracle of the Virgin," has a religious undertone which appealed to Toru; and so did Gautier's poem, "Christmas." Auguste Vacquerie, according to Toru, is "a very pure poet, pure both in his life and his works." and hence her selection of his poem for translation. Auguste Brizeux's poem, "In Praise of Women," has purity of sentiment and depth of realisation about the true nature of women. The poet transcends his passion for physical charms of women and realises that women are not just repository of physical graces, but have the grandeur of soul. Platonic attitude of the poet towards love is thus reflected in the poem. Toru also translated a number of finely lyrical poems which were highly acclaimed by critics of the day; examples may be cited of poems such as "Sonnet" by Felix Arvers, which Toru informs us, "has been praised by the highest authorities, amongst others by Sainte Beuve and Jules Janin, for its grace, delicacy and passion." Beranger's "My Vocation," Toru says, "was a great favourite of Thackeray." Other poems noted for their beauty include, "Roland" by Napoleon Peyrat, "Romance of Nina" by Charles G. Etieme, and Arnault's "The Leaf," which was also translated by Lord Macaulay. In all her translations, whether dealing with the theme of love, or religion, or pathos, Toru displays puritan attitude of the Victorian Age. Here, it is worth the note that in spite of her personal predilection, as a translator, she did not distort the thought and feeling of the original or coloured it with her own emotions. In fact, she retained the ideas, imagery, and even phraseology of the original as far as she could. A side by side comparison between translations of Arnault's "The Leaf"—one by Toru Dutt and one by Lord Macaulay should clarify the above point:
Toru's Translation:
“Detached from thy stalk,
Leaf yellow and dry,
Where goest thou amain?
The tempest's fierce shock
Struck the oak proud and high,
And I struggled in vain.
Since then,—the sad day!
Winds changeful and rude,
Transport me about,
Over mountains,—away,
And o'er valley and wood.
Hark! Their whistle rings out!
I fear not nor heed,
Nor ever complain.
The rose too must go,
And the laurel, I know,
And all things below.
Then why should I strain,
Ah me! to remain?”

Macaulay's Translation:
“Thou poor leaf, so sear and frail,
sport of every wanton gale,
Whence and wither dost thou fly,
Through this bleak autumnal sky?
On a noble oak I grew,
Green, and broad and fair to view;
But the Monarch of the shade
By the tempest low was laid.
From that time I wander o'er
Wood, and valley, hill and moor,
Wheresoe'er the wind is blowing,
Nothing caring, nothing knowing:
Thither go I, whither goes,
Glory's laurel, Beauty's rose.”

By eschewing details, Macaulay has tried to be suggestive and compact; but Toru has retained plaintive mood of the original better than the learned English translator. Concluding part of Toru's translation, by its virtue of sheer elaboration, has explicitly captured the self-consolatory note of the French poet, which is only suggestively conveyed by Macaulay.
The effect of cross-cultural exchange is also discernible in the Ancient Ballads and legends of Hindustan. Saturated in Indian philosophy, myths and legends, the work still betrays Toru's propensity for didacticism. In "The Royal Ascetic and The Hind," there is a "pronouncedly Christian note" in Toru's comments on the failure of King Bharat's asceticism. Toru erroneously construes that it is implied in the original that by yielding to tender love for an orphan fawn, King Bharat failed in his penance. Toru ends her narrative of the hermit-king with the following comment which is clearly indicative of the influence of Christian faith on her mind and heart:

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 ascetic rites, or penance hard,
But with a love, in character akin
To his unselfish, all-including love.
And therefore little can we sympathise
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.

[..............................]

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. (pp. 44-45)

In the legend of Buttoo, the pupil’s self-sacrifice reminds the reader of Christian principle of resignation to the will of God. Seen in this light, the following lines are pertinent:

Glanced the sharp knife one moment high,
The severed thumb was on the sod,
There was no tear in Buttoo’s eye,
He left the matter with his God.
“For this,” — said Dronacharjya, — “Fame
Shall sound thy praise from sea to sea,
And men shall ever link thy name
With Self-help, Truth, and Modesty.” (p. 58)

Also notable here is that “Self-help” of which Toru speaks in context of Buttoo’s sacrifice, is more relevant in Christian theology than in Hindu.

Among the “Miscellaneous Poems,” “The Tree of Life,” Sonnet—Baugmare,” and “Sonnet— The Lotus,” are saturated with Christian thoughts. “The Tree of Life” is a clear ratification of Toru’s Christian ideology. In a moment of revelation, Toru had a vision of the Holy Spirit, and she became aware of her approaching end; Toru was prepared for her death without the slightest hesitation. She had an implicit trust in the sayings of the Bible, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into
prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation." In "Sonnet—Baugmaree," the garden transcends human boundaries and verges on the "primeval Eden" (465), phraseology employed in this poem is indicative of Toru's profound readings of the Bible, and her leanings towards the Christian world. Two other poems, "France 1870," and "Madame Therese," further strengthen this point. It was this love for the Christian world that made her look forward to with much longing at the materialisation of family's often debated plan to go back to England and settle there for good. Sonnet "The Lotus" too has a number of references to western mythology, thus, we have "Flora," "Juno," and "Psyche" (465). These allusions show that Toru's mind was saturated with western images and ideas, she could never forget the delightful days of France and England. H.A.L. Fisher puts it aptly:

She cannot forget the beloved West, the enchantments of frost and snow, the delicate landscapes of France, the vivid, eager College life at Cambridge. In comparison with the stir and bustle of the West, the days in India seemed monotonous and without event. So in the midst of the profuse splendours of the East her thoughts continually reach out to that other home beyond the Ocean, which travel and study had made so dear to her, as, for example, to the world (known only through books) of the Bronte sisters, living 'among the lonely wild moors of Yorkshire, all three so full of talent, yet living so solitary amid those Yorkshire wolds,' or to the days which stood out with such cameo-like distinctness in her memory, when she enjoyed the free life of a student by the banks of the
Cam, passing 'nice cosy evenings' with her friend, and on Sundays
drinking deep draughts of music from the College organ.\textsuperscript{21} A truly heroic soul, her faith gave her sustenance during periods of sore trials—the death of her brother and sister, fighting with grim determination the disease which assailed her, and even at the very doorstep of death, writing to her pen-friend Mlle Clarisse Bader, the following words, "I have been very ill, dear friend, but the good God has granted the prayers of my parents and I am gradually recovering. I hope to write at greater length before long."\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{4.3 Sources of Poetic Outlook— Hindu Theology}

In Toru's poetry, we find no conflict between her Christian faith and the 'deep magics' of Hindu religion of her ancestors. She was after all, "a Hindu as well as a Christian."\textsuperscript{23} She was one with woman-singers of the past, drawing her sustenance, and flourishing on the ancient folklore of India. While she inherited her rich intellectual gifts from her father; she drew moral strength, sweetness of temper, and a love for the ancient culture of India, from her mother. During her early childhood, she listened with awe and wonder to the old ballads and legends as her mother recounted them. The stories of Savitri, Lakshman, Dhrua, Buttoo, Sindhu, Prahlad and Sita, are not mere tales, they are stories with great moral values and as a child Toru imbibed them in her soul with no conscious effort. Afterwards, a study of the legends in original, gave her a keener sensibility towards them. In the \textit{Ancient Ballads}, Toru's love for her motherland is very pronounced. The old ballads, full of heroism, pathos, and lyricism, provided her with a link with between the past and the present, and she would not let go of it even if the Christian or the sceptic cavilled.
A brief overview of what the term 'Hindu thought' indicates should facilitate a further discussion on the topic vis a vis Toru Dutt's works. The term 'Hindu thought' actually encompasses a whole body of thought processes and philosophy which has evolved over many centuries, and which includes many distinct as well as overlapping beliefs and dogmas. The exposition of Hindu thought and philosophy is contained in works such as the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Gita, and the Puranas. The two great epics—the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are also an integral part of the Hindu religion. The Hindu philosophy is a philosophy of negation of the world and strict spiritual discipline in quest of the eternal. In this reference, we may quote Albert Schweitzer, “The Indian Aryans show an inclination to world and life negation, the Iranian-Persian and the European Aryans lean to world and life affirmation. This difference of attitude had its origin in events, and these were reflected in thought.” By “European Aryans,” Schweitzer means the people of Europe, the people who embraced Christianity at the beginning. The core of Hindu thought consists of the philosophy of fatalism, renunciation, search for the immortal values of life, and Yoga—which literary means ‘union’—the union of man with the infinite.

We may now consider Ancient Ballads in light of Hindu thought. “Savitri,” the most sustained effort by Toru, beautifully expresses the Vedantic concept about the transience of human life and all worldly relations as illusion or ‘Maya:’

“I know that in this transient world
All is delusion, — nothing true;
I know its shows are mists unfurled
To please and vanish. To renew
Its bubble joys, be magic bound
In Maya's network frail and fair,
Is not my aim! The gladsome sound
Of husband, brother, friend, is air

(p. 19)

There is an undercurrent of fatalism throughout the poem. Savitri refuses to be cowed down by Narad's ominous prediction about Satyavan's death, she says:

"If Fate so rules, that I should feel
The miseries of a widow's life,
Can man's device the doom repeal?
Unequal seems to be a strife,
Between Humanity and Fate;
None have on earth what they desire;
Death comes to all or soon or late;
And peace is but a wandering fire;"

(p. 7)

In the poem, Toru could also re-create the mystic temper, a common feature in Sanskrit poetry. In this regard, Srinivasa Iyengar's comment is significant:

In the placid Sanskrit narrative, the appearance of a god or a goddess is the normal thing. In an English poem, however, the words need wings of a sort to impose that willing suspension of disbelief—or even induce the momentary surge of belief—without which the poem would fail in its prime purpose. When Satyavan is dead and Savitri is holding anxious vigil by his side, Yama appears before her. Yama is the God of Death, but he is also the Lord of Dharma; he is the great upholder of Law, and not alone the Lord of the King of the Shadows.
That Toru succeeded, where others have failed in conveying the "momentary surge of belief," is made clear in her pithy and concrete description of Yama's approach:

She saw a stranger slowly glide

Beneath the boughs that shrunk aghast.

Upon his head he wore a crown

That shimmered in the doubtful light;

His vestment scarlet reached low down,

His waist, a golden girdle dight.

His skin was dark as bronze; his face

Irradiate, and yet severe;

His eyes had much of love and grace,

But glowed so bright, they filled with fear. (p. 17)

Here is Romesh Chunder Dutt's description of Yama:

In the bosom of the shadows rose a vision dark and dread,

Shape of gloom in inky garment and a crown was on his head,

Gleaming Form of sable splendour, blood-red was his sparkling eye,

And a fatal noose he carried, grim and godlike, dark and high!26

And finally, we may take up the description by Sri Aurobindo:

Something stood there, unearthly, sombre, grand,

A limitless denial of all being

That wore the terror and wonder of a shape.

In its appalling eyes the tenebrous Form

Bore the deep pity of destroying gods.

A sorrowful irony curved the dreadful lips
That speak the word of doom. Eternal Night,
In the dire beauty of an immortal face,
Pitying arose, receiving all that lives
For ever into its fathomless heart, refuge
Of creatures from their anguish and world-pain.
His shape was nothingness made real, his limbs
Were monuments of transience and beneath
Brows of unwearying calm large godlike lids
Silent beheld the writhing serpent, life.
Unmoved their timeless wide unchanging gaze
Had seen the unprofitable cycles pass,
Survived the passing of unnumbered stars
And sheltered still the same immutable orbs.27

As we can discern, Toru’s intimations of death are closer to the mystic intuitions of Sri Aurobindo. Toru’s Yama, like that of Sri Aurobindo’s, is both the God of Death and the God of Dharma, whereas, Romesh Chunder’s Yama is entirely the Dark God, the unrelenting destroyer. Thus, Toru’s grasp of Hindu thought succeeds where Romesh Chunder’s careful art fails.

Vedantic ideas are also reiterated in “Buttoo.” This is how the hunter-boy resolves to attain perfection in the art and science of archery, which was refused him by the great master Dronacharjya:

“And I shall do my best to gain
The science that man will not teach,
For life is as a shadow vain,
Until the utmost goal we reach
To which the soul points. I shall try
To realise my waking dream,
And what if I should chance die?
None miss one bubble from a stream."

Another Hindu aphorism is illustrated in Savitri:

"Of all the pleasures given on earth
The company of the good is best,
For weariness has never birth
In such a commerce sweet and blest;
The sun runs on its wonted course,
The earth its plenteous treasure yields,
All for their sake, and by the force
Their prayer united ever wields.
Oh let me, let me ever dwell
Amidst the good, where'er it be,
Whether in lowly hermit-cell
Or in some spot beyond the sea.

Here is an example of an Upanishadic idea beautifully expressed in "Savitri:"

The dreadful sword
Like lightning glanced one moment dire;
And then the inner man was tied,
The soul no bigger than the thumb,
To be borne onwards by his side; —

The "inner man" mentioned herein is the 'Jivatma.'
Apart from Vedantic ideas, it is the theory of ‘Karma’ which finds expression again and again in Ancient Ballads. Briefly stated, Karma theory is based on the conviction that the present life is only one in a chain of births. Various facets of the present life— character, status, and disposition, is the accumulated result of moral and immoral actions of our previous lives and our future life will be determined by our actions in the present life. In the course of many rebirths, a person may accumulate enough good actions to realise the eternal union with the infinite, and thus become free from pangs of repeated births and deaths; on the other hand, one can also degenerate through immoral actions to the extent that one takes birth in animal form in the next birth. The process is inevitable and hence the Hindu theology puts a great importance on moral actions. A few extracts from Ancient Ballads are quoted below to illustrate Toru’s firm grasp on Karma theory, and her exposition of it in her poems:

"The favours man accords to men

Are never fruitless, from them rise

A thousand acts beyond our ken

That float like incense to the skies;

For benefits can ne’er efface,

They multiply and widely spread,

And honour follows on their trace.

Sharp penances, and vigils dread,

Austerities, and wasting fasts,

Create an empire and the blest

Long as this spiritual empire lasts

Become the saviours of the rest."
In the above passage from "Savitri," the poetess brings out that aspect of the doctrine of Karma which enthuses man to do good since good deeds must necessarily bring good result, whether we see them or not. Even unknown to us, our acts of goodness are rewarded, just as our evil deeds are surely punished. In the passage from "The Legend of Dhruva" quoted below, the accumulative result of sins and virtues of our previous births on our present lives are expounded. It also extols virtues like patience, humility, and trust in God's dispensation:

For glorious actions done

Not in this life, but in some previous birth,
Suruchee by the monarch is beloved.
Women, unfortunate like myself, who bear
Only the name of wife without the powers,
But pine and suffer for our ancient sins.
Suruchee raised her virtues pile on pile,
Hence Uttama her son, the fortunate!
Suneetee heaped but evil, — hence her son
Dhruva the luckless! But for all this, child,
it is not meet that thou should ever grieve
As I have said. That man is truly wise
Who is content with what he has, and seeks
Nothing beyond, but in whatever sphere,
Lowly or great, God placed him, works in faith;
My son, my son, though proud Suruchee spake
Harsh words indeed, and hurt thee to the quick,
Yet to thine eyes thy duty should be plain.
Collect a large sum of virtues; thence
A goodly harvest must to thee arise. (pp. 47-48)

Even-handed justice meted out by the hands of fate, which relentlessly pursues a person, unseen and unyielding, till justice is administered, is beautifully brought out in the ballad of "Sindhu."

The spirit of worldly sacrifice, for the sake of spiritual attainments, a doctrine to which the Hindu mind is naturally attuned, is educed in the "Legend of Dhruba." In "Prahlad," there are references to "Brahmins" and "the holy Veds," and "pundits wise" (70). Prahlad's speeches are reaffirmation of his undaunted faith in God and the dogma of re-embodiment of soul:

"The coward calls black white, white black,
At bidding, or in fear of death;
Such suppleness, thank God, I lack,
To die is but to lose my breath.
Is death annihilation? No.
New worlds will open on my view,
When persecuted hence I go,
The right is right, — the true is true." (p. 73)

The Cardinal principle of Omnipresent, Omnipotent, and Omniscient God, various images and statues being mere representations of various aspects of that eternal, indivisible, infinite power, is also revealed by Prahlad with the conviction of a true devotee:

There is only one God — One only, — mark!

To him is all our service due.
“Hath he a shape, or hath He none?
I know not this, nor care to know.
Dwelling in light, to which the sun
Is darkness, — He sees all below,
Himself unseen! In Him I trust,
He can protect me if He will,
And if this body turn to dust,
He can new life again instil.

The story of Prahlad, a true devotee of God, who, despite dire threats, remained unflinching in his devotion, lives on, providing solace and inspiration to the Indian people in their moments of spiritual vacillation.

4.4 Sources of Poetic Outlook—Social Ideals

To fully appreciate the poetry of Toru Dutt, and to understand her outlook of life, it would be useful to take into account various social ideals expressed in Ancient Ballads. The elucidation of these ideals may seem to point towards a tendency towards didacticism on part of the poetess; however, since the medium of her expression is the ancient ballads and legends, the charge is, to a certain extent, extenuated. The themes of antiquity that Toru handled perhaps necessitated such a treatment. Among the various ideals held aloft by the Indian society, the ideal of womanhood, appealed to Toru the most. It is thus she speaks glowingly of the epitome of womanhood in ancient India to her friends Mary Martin and Mlle Clarisse Bader. In “Savitri” Toru pays her adoration for the legendary heroine of ancient India; her quiet determination, whole-hearted devotion to her husband, and the power of true love conquering all obstacles—
even death, are well rendered by Toru. Savitri is resolute in her purpose to claim her husband back from the God of Death, when Yama tells her not to follow him, but to go back and perform the funeral rites of Satyavan as laid down by the scriptures, Savitri replies:

"Where'er my husband dear is led,
Or journeys of his own free will,
I too must go, though darkness spread
Across my path, portending ill,
'This thus my duty I have read!
If I am wrong, oh! with me bear;
But do not bid me backward tread
My way forlorn, — for I can dare
All things but that; ah! pity me,
A woman frail, too sorely tried!
And let me, let me follow thee,
O gracious god, — whate'er betide. (p. 18)

Savitri is the portrait of ideal Hindu wife; she will not leave her husband either in weal or in woe. Courage and determination which she displayed in her encounter with Yama, is a quality inherent in her, even earlier, she had exhibited the same single-minded determination in face of opposition from her father and Narad Muni regarding her choice of husband; refusing to accept Narad's counsel, she spoke in fervent determination:

"And why should I? When I have given
My heart away, though but in thought,
Can I take it back? Forbid it, Heaven!  

(p. 18)
It were a deadly sin, I wot.

And why should I? I know no crime

In him or his.”

[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]

Unwedded to my dying day

I must, my father dear, remain;

’Tis well, if so thou will’st, but say

Can man balk Fate or break its chain? (pp. 5-7)

While Savitri is the portrait of ideal wife, “Lakshman” is the embodiment of ideal brother. Obedient to the letter, Lakshman is content to serve his elder brother and seeks no glory for himself, but glorifies his brother Rama. Forced by unwarranted insinuations of Sita to leave her alone in the forest and go to his brother’s aid, Lakshman first tries to placate Sita’s troubled mind by convincing her of Rama’s invincibility:

“Oh calm thyself, Videhan Queen,

No cause is there for any fear,

Hast thou his prowess never seen?

Wipe off for shame that dastard tear!

What being of demonian birth

Could ever brave his mighty arm?

Is there a creature on the earth

That dares to work our hero harm? (p. 29)

When finally, unable to bear her biting words, Lakshman decides to go to the forest, though besieged with a sense of impeding disaster, he absolves her of all guilt, his speeches throughout are heroic:
"In going hence I disregard
   The plainest orders of my chief,
A deed for me, — a soldier, — hard
   And deeply painful, but thy grief
And language, wild and wrong, allow
   No other course. Mine be the crime,
And mine alone, — but oh, do thou
   Think better of me from this time. (p. 33)

Even while going out, Lakshman is not forgetful of his sworn duty— the protection of Sita, and draws a magic circle around the hut, and instructs Sita not to cross the circle come whatever. We know that Sita did not heed to Lakshman's instruction and is abducted by the demon king Ravana, leading to a fierce battle between Rama and Ravana— the forces of good and evil, and the good finally triumphs over the evil.

Though based on folklore and not on Holy Scriptures of Hindu religion, "Jogadhya Uma" still presents an aspect of Hindu ideal— that a life of piety and simple hearted devotion is valued more in the eyes of God than extraneous show of piousness. The simple peddler of shell-bracelets beheld the Goddess, conversed with her, and even traded shell-bracelets with her, to have a vision of whom, many spend their whole lives in meditation, fasts, and penances. Divine play of the Almighty is unfathomable to mere mortals, who can only witness his dispensations with awe astonishment:

"How strange! How strange! Oh blest art thou
   To have beheld her, touched her hand,
Before whom Vishnu's self must bow,
And Brahma and his heavenly band!
Here have I worshipped her for years
And never seen the vision bright;
Vigils and fasts and secret tears
Have almost quenched my outward sight;
And yet that dazzling form and face
I have not seen, and thou, dear friend,
To thee, unsought for, comes the grace,
What may its purport be, and end?

In "The Royal Ascetic and The Hind," we witness the clash of two ideals—asceticism and love. The great ascetic, King Bharat, adopts an orphan fawn, and in its love he forgets his asceticism. Even at the time of death, his whole being is with his foster child:

To it devoted was his last, last thought,
Reckless of present and of future both!

The clash between love and asceticism is also the theme of "The Legend of Dhruva." In it however, there is a reversal of sides, stern asceticism wins over the need for father's love of a young child. On being rebuffed by his step-mother when he sat on his father's lap, Dhruva decides to leave the palace to live among hermits of the forest, and pursue the path of penance and devotion. Following his chosen path, Dhruva finally attains immortality. The young child's indignation and firm determination are revealed in the following lines:

And I shall strive unceasing for a place
Such as my father hath not won, — a place
That would not know him even, — aye, a place
Far, far above the highest of this earth."

The story of "Buttoo" brings before us the ideal of a perfect disciple who
grudges not even the highest sacrifice demanded by the master. From "Buttoo,"
the ideal disciple, we move on to "Sindhu," the ideal son. Shot unwittingly by King
Dasarath, Sindhu lay dying on the river bank. Even in the agony of death, his last
thoughts are for his blind, old parents who are waiting anxiously for his return to
quench their thirst and break their fast. These are noble expressions indeed from
the lips of a dutiful son:

"And so I die — a bloody death —
But not for this I mourn,
To feel the world pass with my breath
I gladly could have borne.

"But for my parents, who are blind,
And have no other stay, —
This, this weighs sore upon my mind,
And fills me with dismay."

Like "Savitri," "Sita" too presents the picture of ideal womanhood. While "Savitri"
is the portrayal of love and wifely devotion, "Sita" is the embodiment of
forbearance. Exiled by her husband due to a slanderous rumour, she bears all
her tribulations with patience, she only weeps in silence at the treatment meted
out to her. She is the epitome of fortitude and temperance.

Coming thus far, we can see that in her poetry, Toru Dutt transcends the
boundaries of any single race, culture, or religion. In her works she borrows from
the East and the West, the Hindu and the Christian, and creates an infusion that
is traditional as well as modern, personal as well as universal. She is the
progenitor of modern Indo-Anglian poetry. Seen in this perspective, the following
assertion by E.J. Thompson needs refutation:

Her work, [Ancient Ballads and Legends] as it stands, is not deeply-
rooted. [...] I am not blind to their scattered beauties, [...] But the
facts remain, of carelessness, and, what is more serious, lack of
sympathy in the author. She stands outside her themes and does
not enter deeply into them. Nor can I consider those themes as of
anything like first-class value. Some have a rustic charm which
strikes the mind pleasantly enough, but not deeply; others had been
handled ages before Toru took them up, by writers whose minds
were primitive, as hers emphatically was not, and in sympathy, as
hers again was not.28

Toru not only entered deeply into her themes, but also handled them with much
delicacy. Largely objective in her versification, she has yet imparted them with a
personal touch. Another charge that the themes had been handled long before by
writers with 'primitive minds,' is not tenable, if the sages and seers of ancient
India—the people who created works of such immortal nature as the Vedas, the
Puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and a host of others—which are in
fact, repository of ancient knowledge and culture, were people with 'primitive
minds,' then, it is well-nigh impossible to find people with cultivated minds
anywhere in the world.
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2) Quoted from: *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*. (pp. 65-67)


4) Ibid. (pp. 10-11)

5) Ibid. (pp. 180-181)

6) Quoted from: *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*. (pp. 310-311)

7) Ibid. (p. 311)

8) Ibid. (p. 11)

9) Ibid. (p. 63)

10) Ibid. (p. 64)

11) Ibid. (p. 310)

12) Idem.

13) Ibid. (p. 186)


15) Idem.

16) Idem.

17) Idem.

18) Ibid. (pp. 151-152)

19) Iyengar, K.R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. (p. 64)


22) "Appendix I." *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt.* (p. 354)


25) Iyengar, K.R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English.* (p. 66)

26) Idem.


28) "Supplementary Review." *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt.* (p. 343)