CHAPTER 6

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In Raja Rao’s novel The Serpent and the Rope, the hero Rama, declares that India is not so much a country as it is an idea. India was discovered as an idea, as a literary and cultural landscape, by the Europeans in the early 19th century—long after it had been traded with, settled in, conquered and colonised. The discovery not only of India, but of the East in general, was part of poignant and significant change of heart. It was an aftermath of the period of conflict and expansion by the newly industrialised West. As the Victorian age faded into the Edwardian evening, sounds of dissent and distrust that rose from imperialist expansion of the European nations, merged with the murmur of excitement of discovery, to create a muted romantic chorus. Exoticism, for the Westerner, became identical with the East—the East which stretched from the Arab world to Japan. The journeying whether real or imaginary, shared a hunger for innocence and a hunger for pure aesthetic pleasures. On the face of it, there may seem little in common between the decadent asceticism of Oscar Wilde and Buddha of Edwin Arnold’s Light of Asia, until we recall that this is the poem which praised upon Dorian Gray in a last unsuccessful attempt to prevent his tragic end. The Satanist deep down is looking for his “Nirvana” towards the East. It is easy from our cynical vantage point to score the self-indulgence of a Loti wallowing in pity and passion over some Polynesian beauty or unhappy Geisha. Freudian critics see him projecting his own weakness on the unhappy and deserted women of the East, and dressing them up in sarong or sari. The modern man has his own brand of romantic fixation, but it is no longer in fashion to be in love with the
mysterious East. It is easy to forget even, that the process of discovery was mutual. Before Loti, before Flecker, and before Omar, there were Indians who were stirred by their romantic visions of Europe, and it will be pertinent to speak about the romantics of the 19th century and the contributions they made to the process of romantic discovery. Romantics of the period looked at the Western world and then at their own, and created a bridge between the two.

Calcutta, in the second half of the 19th century, was the loveliest city in India, and paradoxically, with its expanding graveyards and endemic diseases, the most lethal and doom laden as well. It was also a living symbol of the impact of Europe, notably of the British on India. On the banks of the Hoogly, East India Company established a trading port, which grew into one of the greatest cities of the East. Lacking the history of Delhi or Jaipur, Calcutta offered fertile, vibrant, and explosive interaction of cultures, people, and religious faiths. The Bengalis', with their quickness of wit, artistic sensibility, and intellectual ability, had minds that were open to influences that rushed in, in the wake of the East India Company and the Christian missionaries. The British on the whole, wished for peace, including, not wanting to disturb the fabric of religion and custom with Christian ideas or excitement of European thoughts. However, the Hindu society weakened already as it was, offered little resistance to the stronger, self-confident, and attractively novel culture. English not only became by decree the official language and the language of higher education, but was also lapped up by the newly emergent Bengali middle class, and they handed it on to their children at an early age. Dynamism of the period found an eloquent and sincere spokesman in Derozio. Derozio wrote in feverish determination to transform the Indian society. Apart from Christianity and the European Romantic writers,
Derozio was much inspired by the great scholar and reformer Raja Rammohun Roy, who, like Derozio, was dismayed by the decay of Hindu society, and was driven to disgust by its superstitions and social ills.

It is in this context of India's cultural milieu that the need is felt to come out of our cocoon of smugness and reawaken our interest in the pioneering work done by Toru Dutt and other early Indo-Anglian poets and authors. During her life-time, and for several years after her death, Toru was spoken of highly by critics—Indian, English, and French. Among critical approbation which Toru received, one of the first was from Sir Edmund Gosse. The noted scholar went so ecstatic that he even glossed over her shortcomings:

A rare virtue of Miss Toru Dutt's translations is their absolute and unaffected exactness. An English translator will always try to smooth over an inelegance, rather than give us a true but awkward equivalent of the original. Miss Dutt is less anxious to be graceful on all occasions; she translates what she sees before her, [. . .] In consequence, her book recalls the French more vividly than any similar volume we are acquainted with; and if modern French literature were entirely lost, it might not be found impossible to reconstruct a great number of poems from this Indian version.¹

Another noted man of letters, H.A.L. Fisher, too was generous in his praise for Toru. His observations may be quoted in some length here:

Toru Dutt was a poet with a rare genius for the acquisition of languages not her own. In her all too brief life she mastered Sanskrit and wrote in French and English with a grace, a facility, and an individual distinction which have given her rank among the
authentic voices of Western literature. [. . .] In the long history of the contact and interfusion of East and West, I doubt whether there is a figure more encouraging or significant.²

Even at a later period, post-independence, Toru found some approbation among the Indian scholars. Dr. Amaranath Jha, in his "Introductory Memoir" to Ancient Ballads, summed her contribution in the following words:

One cannot help regretting that time cut short prematurely a career of such promise and such early fulfilment. [. . .] That was not to be. Let us contend that we had this brief visitant in our midst and she remains eternally young, for ever fresh and for ever fair, still dreaming the glittering dreams of youth.³

Speaking of the heritage left behind by Toru Dutt, Padmini Sengupta says, "she herself has become a heritage of India, bringing renown to her motherland through the arches of the years—a name ever to be remembered. Toru, a frail and exotic blossom which bloomed but for a short while, has a left fragrance which will never die."⁴ And the Pioneer of Indo-Anglian studies, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes:

Here and there in her renderings the metre undoubtedly limps a little; the right word sometimes eludes her, and even her grammar occasionally nods. But the total impression! French and English were alike ‘foreign’ to Toru—yet she would attempt the impossible. And her achievement was little short of miraculous, taking all circumstances into consideration.⁵

This far, we have seen a sample of commendations which have been accorded to Toru. However, it would be fooling oneself if we are to consider that
Toru only "earned for herself approbation of almost all critics and the condemnation of none."6 Indeed, modern Indo-Anglians have spoken disparagingly about her contribution to Indo-Anglian poetry. In response to an item in a questionnaire circulated at the “Writer’s Workshop,” which goes thus: “The best of Indian English verses belongs to the nineteenth century [. . .] In authenticity of diction and feeling Sri Aurobindo far outshines the others, but Toru Dutt’s charming pastiche still holds some interest. — Your comments please,” a number of modernists offered their view which are indicative of their total ignorance and even a denial of the very existence of the pioneers. A few reactions are quoted below before discussing the point further:

• Keki N. Daruwala, "I have read only one poem each by Toru Dutt and Sri Aurobindo Ghose, and I have no intention of reading any more."

• Neera Pillai, "I am not qualified to comment on this statement, having read neither Toru Dutt nor Sri Aurobindo extensively."

• Rayaprol, "I could not wade through Savitri and Toru Dutt’s few biographical details are of more interest than her charming pastiche."

• Pritish Nandy, "Toru Dutt’s fine, if you are interested in that kind of sugary stuff [. . .] these poets who are at their best sixth-rate."

• Nissim Ezekiel, "I find no pastiche in Toru Dutt but the interest of her verse for me is severely limited. If she had lived longer, I have no doubt she would have produced a sizeable body of interesting verse."
• G.S. Sarat Chandra, "Toru Dutt, Aurobindo, Tagore and others were great writers. If they were alive and writing they wouldn't have been romanticists or symbolists any more [. . .] The literature of the past (the works of Toru Dutt, for example) is out of syntax with the present time."  

Even if we dismiss some of these remarks as cheeky and exhibitionist, what comes through is that pre-independence Indian writing in English is generally not given any importance by post-independence writers. They are ready and even eager to repudiate the existence of a whole body of Indo-Anglian writing as constituting any tradition for them. This is possibly due to their frigid sensibility or their ignorance which they freely flaunt. At any rate, the creative personality of Toru Dutt means nothing to most of them. However, time is a great leveller, while the name of Toru Dutt is mentioned in all historical accounts of Indo-Anglian Literature; a few such self-satisfied versifiers have already been purged out. Toru has her own special niche in the vast mansion of Indian Writing in English. In view of changing times and changing literary tastes, which has led to a deprecating attitude towards the pioneers of the field, which can in the long run be self-abnegating, it is vitally important to re-evaluate the contributions of early writers and poets as Toru Dutt. Her position is also unique in the history of Indo-Anglian literature, she being the first woman to write prose and poetry in English and French.

Here, it will be worth the effort to understand the organic relationship between the 'man,' the moment, and the milieu. Born at a time in history when the Indian society was in a state of flux, Toru Dutt was brought up in an intellectually stimulating and deeply religious environment. From her father she
inherited intellectual acuity, while from her mother she imbibed religious tolerance. Old songs and stories recited by her mother held an irresistible charm for her, and they fired her imagination. At the same time, it was her mother who instilled in her deep reverence for the Christian faith. Though the intense reality of religion to children is not always appreciated, an episode from Toru’s early life brings us face to face with one of the dilemmas of Christian ethics which the young child faced, and the way she dealt with it. When Toru was about six years old, one day, as the two sisters were playing, Aru said to her, “You are a Christian, are you not? It is written in the Bible that, if any one smites you on one cheek, you must turn the other also. Now, supposing any one struck you on one cheek, would you be able to turn the other to him?” Toru replied, “Yes, I should.” Aru immediately gave Toru a resounding slap on her cheek, Toru burst out crying, but did not retaliate.

In 1865, their brother Abju, died, creating a great void in the Dutt family life, and the two sisters turned to Paradise Lost for solace. Recalling those days, Toru wrote, “We used to read Milton with him [Babu Shib Chunder Bannerjea] latterly; we read Paradise Lost over and over so many times that we had the first book and part of the second by heart.” Though Hindu myths and legends held a strong attraction, Toru and her family were alienated from society and even from other branches of the family due to hostility of orthodox Hindu society, which considered the act of conversion an unpardonable sin. When the family left for Europe in 1869, it marked the beginning of a new phase in Toru’s life. In absence of the stifles of an orthodox society, Toru’s inherent gifts quickly blossomed. The return back home in 1873, also marked for Toru the return back to roots of her ancient heritage.
The life of Toru Dutt is thus a picture of healthy synthesis of two different levels of consciousness—the union of the East and the West brought about by literary activity long before it was acted upon in socio-political sphere. An Indian by birth and European by training, she was best equipped to handle this noble task. Living in the heart of Calcutta, she used to dream of alien shores of France and England. An avid reader of French and English literature, it was however her love for the mystic past of her motherland, which remained supreme till the last. It was this love for motherland which prompted Toru to correspond with Mlle Clarisse Bader, expressing her desire to translate her French work La Femme dans l'Inde Antique, and the permission to do so was readily granted. In her reply to Toru, Mlle Bader wrote:

Is it really a descendant of my dear Indian heroines who wishes to translate the work dedicated to the ancient Aryans of the Gangetic Peninsula? Such a desire, and coming from such a source must be granted. Translate therefore Woman in Ancient India; with all my heart do I authorise you to do it and with fullest sympathy do I wish you every success in you enterprise. [...] 'If I except the women of the Bible, it is amongst the Indians that I found the greatest purity and devotion.'—Believe, dear mademoiselle, in my cordial sympathy.\(^{10}\)

Her Sheaf and Le Journal attest to her fondness for French language and people. Similarly, Bianca and Ancient Ballads are voluble evidence of her love for English. The latter is also a brilliant synthesis of the Indian and the English; it being a fragrant flower nurtured by indigenous sources. Her Indian roots are also betrayed in her prose works. In this regard, Sir Edmund Gosse remarks:
The story [of Le Journal] is simple, clearly told, and interesting; the studies of character have nothing French about them, but they are full of vigor and originality. The description of the hero is most characteristically Indian: — [. . .] In this description we seem to recognise some Surya or Soma of Hindoo mythology, and the final touch, meaningless as applied to a 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 Dasyous.¹¹

Toru's literary works are a proof that she stood all for East-West understanding. Her learned father— a poet and linguist in his own right, her truly religious mother, her own readings of French, English, and Hindu literatures, and her wide sympathies for the entire mankind; these were the factors that made possible the fashioning of a mind so inclined.

The importance of Toru Dutt can better be understood today in view of the fact that the two poles of the globe have come closer together than ever before. There are a number of points of contact between them today; cultural and educational exchanges have become the order of the day. Such an atmosphere, which is conducive to the promotion of universal brotherhood and the creation of a world without borders, is to a large measure, due to ground-breaking initiatives taken by the early Indo-Anglians in literary sphere. Toru Dutt was, in the truest sense, a citizen of the world. In her case, Kipling's well known diction, 'East is East and West is West / And never the twain shall meet,' becomes meaningless.

E.J. Thompson is nearer the truth when he remarks that:
There is abundant proof that this girl, so amazingly and richly at home in two alien literatures, was growing into her own nation and its thought, and would have shown us Christian thought and feeling, not as something alien but as truly belonging to Him in Whom there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, English nor Bengali. What Michael Dutt was too shallow to have done, our other Christian poet would have accomplished, and in a measure actually did accomplish.  

The distinction of the East and the West is usually made on the ground that former is spiritualistic and latter is materialistic. However, the fact is that unlike their Western counterparts, Indian philosophers do not take life piecemeal; they are concerned with the complete personality of man combining both the spiritual and the material. In case of Toru Dutt, the distinction further diminishes because her concern was not political or religious per se, but it was literary, and literature in its truest sense recognises no boundaries, linguistic or religious; it is universal. Toru Dutt, her life and works are exemplary models of the exchange between the East and the West.

6.1 The Blazing Trail—A Summing Up

Toru Dutt's place in the annals of Indo-Anglian literature is assured. To this statement however, questions may be raised as to the niche she occupies in that school of literature. Question may also be raised that, can she, being a translator chiefly, be quartered among genuine creators. To this, we only need to point out that it was Toru Dutt, the first among major Indo-Anglian writers, who proved that "translation is not an isolated phenomenon but an index of personality meaningful
in its relatedness with a greater heritage, cultural and literary. She gave a status to translation."\(^{13}\) Afterwards, Jyotirindranath Tagore followed the same path with his *Pharasi Prasun* (Flowers from the French Garden.), and achieved considerable success. In comparison to Tagore's, Toru's success is far more remarkable in that she clung to a foreign media and delocalised one foreign association into another; this Toru did with an artistic totality in view. Most modern writers are in more than one sense, translators. They borrow from various sources, recent or remote, and assimilate these in their works. Toru for her part, learnt lessons from the French Parnassians, and it was lucky for her. The Parnassians were the link between the norms of classicism and modernity. Soon after her return from Europe, she got her essay on Leconte de Lisle— the protagonist of Parnassian Movement, published in the *Bengal Magazine* in 1874; she was then only eighteen. Regarding the choice of the essay, Sir Gosse maintains that it was on "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."\(^{14}\) This is something unique and unforeseen when seen in immediate context of the literary background of Bengal. The Bengali poets at the time were trying to grapple with the problem of trying to give a true voice to their feeling; but they could not always adapt their poetry to an appropriate form. They were struggling to find a balance between utilitarianism and aestheticism. Toru too breathed in the same atmosphere as her elder contemporaries did, however, as she had a close acquaintance with the literatures of France and England, she deviated from them and in the process, attributed supreme importance to form and pictorial precision, a statement of faith which suited the Parnassians.
From the French masters, Toru learnt the nuances of poetic expression and the mastery over emotion. Her rendering of Heine’s "Le Message" exemplifies this point:

To horse, my squire! To horse and quick!
Be winged like the hurricane,
Fly to the chateau on the plain,
And bring me news, for I am sick.
Glide 'mid the steeds and ask a groom,
After some talk, this simple thing—
"Of the two daughters of our king,
Who is to wed, and when, and whom?"
And if he tell thee—"tis the brown',
Come sharply back and let me know:
But if 'the blonde', ride soft and slow:
The moon-light's pleasant on the down.
And as thou comest, faithful squire,
Get me a rope from shop or store,
And gently enter through this door,
And speak no word but swift retire.¹⁵

It will not be out of order to infer that Toru's translation has over and above the palpable quality of the French original, has an element of Indian-ness about it. In its pronounced self-denial and sublime surrender, it is more oriental than occidental. A commingling of the orient and the occident is also notable in Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan. In the nine pen-portraits drawn by Toru, Indian characters are imparted certain occidental sensibilities. Here is a
depiction of Savitri, who is courageous enough to wrench her husband's life from the God of death, and is yet a picture of sweetness and humility:

"This weakness, Love, I understand!

Courage!" She smiled away his fears.

"Now we shall go, for thou art strong."

She helped him rise up by her side

And led him like a child along.

He wistfully the basket eyed

Laden with fruit and flowers. "Not now,

Tomorrow we shall fetch it hence."

And so, she hung it on a bough,

"I'll bear thy saw for our defence."

In one fair hand the saw she took,

The other with a charming grace

She twined around him, and her look

She turned upwards to his face. (p. 27)

This then, is Savitri, the mythical heroine resurrected by Toru; a heroine of indomitable will and humility, who faces destiny not with passive resignation but with courage and confidence. Toru's delineation of Lakshman, the ideal of dutifulness as enunciated in the Ramayana is also noteworthy:

Only a sorrow dark, that seemed

To deepen his resolve to dare

All dangers. Hoarse the vulture screamed,

As out he strode with dauntless air. (p. 34)
This novelty of presentation and thought is the result of Toru's poetic vision which gives imminent doom an optimistic colour. This is traditional as well as modern—traditional in its theme and modern in its temper. Even though Toru had a penchant from didacticism, what saves her poetry from moral prepossession is her craftsmanship in the art of lyrical ballad marked with narrative simplicity.

Another important factor that must be taken into account regarding Toru's poetic vision is that her India was not the India of European utopia. Though she knew her Scott well, she did not subscribe to his inclination to romanticize and mystify India. Nor did she share Thomas Moore's illusion for idyllic association of India with a moralizing tendency. Rather, she assimilated the Indian philosophy of co-existence of the sublime and the awesome, and this can be inferred even in her rendition of French poets, for example, in "Sonnet—Freedom" by Gramont:

By iron bars the lion proud hemmed round,

*The sovereign lion with the terrible eyes,*

Vanquished, yet still invincible, defies

Not by vain efforts but a calm profound.

Idle, he sits, as wont, upon the ground,

His claws drawn in their sheath, and none descries

In his unchanging front the rage that lies

Deep in his bosom without sign or sound.

'Tis sometimes only, when he sniffs the storm

Sweeping afar, he stirs and lifts his form,

Savage, magnificent. Then to hear his roar
The gaolers tremble;—but he drops anew;
Not long has he to pine on dungeon floor;
He chokes for freedom: death must soon ensue.¹⁶

Toru could thus, through her poetic translations, reveal the paradoxical nature of human existence. She exhibited a great ability and originality to bring Indo-Anglian poetry to a high level of poetic excellence. She founded a worthy tradition in nascent form and guided the path of those who came later. Her predecessors, Henry Derozio, Kashiprasad Ghosh, and Michael Madhusudan Dutt, were mere experimentalists in the field. Their poetry lacked narrative art, vivid characterization, depth of feeling, and technical finish; all of which are found to a greater degree in Toru’s poetry. During her short life, she had mastered the sonnet form, and made use of the blank verse with some competence. She remains the only poet in modern India who handled the ballad measure with success. Speaking of her poetic craft, E.F. Oaten says:

Her English poetry displayed real creative and imaginative power and almost faultless technical skill. In her English translations A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields, and in her Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan, she so nearly achieved a striking success as to make one regret that our language is essentially unsuited to the riot of imagery and ornament which form part of the natural texture of the oriental mind. Her early death in 1877 at the age of twenty-one was a loss to her and our race, but her life and literary achievements were an earnest of the more remarkable results
which were like to ensure, and are ensuring from the fusing of western and eastern culture.¹⁷

Though Toru's poetic output is meagre, they are real gems whose glory remain undiminished even after a span of more than a hundred and twenty-five years. She has carved out a permanent place in the domain of English poetry. Prof. T.O.D. Dunn says, "She is the first of the new school of Indian poets, and both in England and India her place and her memory are assured."¹⁸ Both her poetic volumes A Sheaf and Ancient Ballads, are more than works of translations, they are in fact trans-creations. They reveal to us the force of her personality in context of cultural and literary heritage. She imparts her works freshness and originality which were unknown in the works of her predecessors. As has been discussed earlier, Toru Dutt favoured Romantic tradition. She is said to have laboured under the influence of such Romantic poets as Browning and Tennyson. A Sheaf shows her inclination towards the French Romanticists, while Ancient Ballads is full of romantic fervour for the bygone grandeur of her motherland. However, we cannot place her in "any water-tight category or school of poets."¹⁹ Her selection is not limited to the Romantic school alone, it is wide ranging. Though it is a different matter that up to Toru's time, best French poetry was written by the Romanticists. Toru Dutt is a marvel which nature throws up once in a while when she grows wary of her own uniformity and rigidity.

Delicate and brilliant, Toru Dutt sprang and flourished as plants do in fertile tropic lands and was dead at twenty-one, bequeathing her poems to a world that scarce dreamt of her existence. In the poignancy of her early death, in the mystery of child genius, we have a kind of paradigm of Westernised Bengali Romanticism. In some ways, Toru like Derozio, a Christian and a precocious
human being, fascinated and moulded by literatures of France and England. But perhaps, unlike Derozio's more flamboyant faith, Toru's faith ran quietly, yet deeply, and was expressed with as touching simplicity as was her poetry. She possessed a dynamic vitality, a love of life and great courage in face of catastrophe. It is significant that Aru's death was followed by a change in direction of her studies and poetry. Death in a sense became her guide leading her back to childhood, and back to India. There is something greatly moving, indeed heroic, in Toru's passionate response to Indian lores while she lay prostrate coughing blood and hiding her frail body from blistering Indian sun, finding the effort of writing a dreadful yet loving burden. Toru Dutt stands out as a pride of the nineteenth century India, illuminating her literary sky like a shooting star. Yet, she is much more than that, in her we find the fulfilment of the hopes and aspirations of those English people who came to India with the genuine desire to help this unhappy land of unfulfilled promises to reach her destiny. We cannot perhaps think of a greater fulfilment of human soul than in Toru Dutt—in her high moral qualities, unshakable faith in the Lord, in great intellectual achievements, we have a perfect Renaissance figure. She has been characterized as a "great daughter of India, holy as a white lotus, sweet as a rose, who was oblivious of the soul that produced her and enjoyed the beauty of the sky and air, redolent of myrrh instead of tulasi." The only objection here is that Toru breathed the air redolent of both "myrrh" and "tulasi." The latter taken as a symbol of the soul of India, it is impossible to believe that the composer of Ancient Ballads should remain oblivious of the soul of the land that created an infusion so powerful, yet so delicate.
As a poetess, Toru Dutt has never been forsaken—not yet at least; there is hardly another English writer in India who is so regularly remembered in journals and anthologies of the country. She has passed the test of time and is still very much alive, proving herself a classic. It is therefore difficult to agree with those who treat her as a dead-horse. Right from her own days a number of her poems, notably, “My Vocation,” “Our Casuarina Tree,” “The Lotus,” “Sonnet—Baugmaree,” “Savitri,” “Lakshman,” “Sita,” and others, have been prescribed in syllabi schools and universities. Sir Edmund Gosse’s prediction that “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 songs,” has come true, and so we do find her name in George Sampson’s The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature. Toru Dutt has come to occupy her rightful place in the history of English literature. The words of Ben Johnson ring true for her when he sang:

It is not growing like a tree
In bulk, doth make man better be;

Or standing long an oak, three hundred year,
To fall a log at last, dry, bald, and sere:

A lily of a day
Is fairer far in May,

Although it fall and die that night;

It was the plant and flower of Light.

In small proportions we just beauties see;
And in short measures life may perfect be.
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