CHAPTER 3

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Toru Dutt has left behind such a glorious legacy that even today we think of her as a marvellous young girl who died before her prime after blazing a trail of brilliance in early Indo-Anglian poetry. She was the first woman writer in the history of Indo-Anglian literature. She was also among the first to realise and affect the much needed rapprochement between the Eastern and the Western knowledge. Toru Dutt was undeniably the finest flower of Indian Renaissance that began with Raja Rammohun Roy—the tireless crusader for English education in India. Raja Rammohun Roy was intensely religious but never orthodox in his outlook. He was a great humanist and a social reformer who vigorously fought against all kinds of Hindu orthodoxy and obscurantism. Throughout his life, Rammohun Roy strove for integration of India's religion based culture and the new scientific outlook which was then gaining ground in the West. He was of the view that learning of English and science and an understanding of Christianity were essential ingredients to achieve this integration. "He begged, pleaded, argued or exhorted as occasion demanded; fearlessness and an eye for actuality were the sources of his strength; and the main aim of his dedicated endeavours was the total regeneration of India, comprising economic progress, political education, cultural renaissance and spiritual awakening." It was following such persistent demands for Western type of education by the Indian intelligentsia that the British government declared English as the sole medium of instruction in
Indian schools. A precocious child, born immediately after this, and at a time when the euphoria of Indian reawakening was still high, Toru imbibed the spirit of Renaissance. Later, a prolonged stay in Europe created in her a new awareness about the need of forging an East-West understanding. "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."²

Toru’s first appearance in print was in 1874 when two of her essays— one on the French poet Leconte de Lisle, and one on the Father of Indo-Anglian poetry Henry Derozio, were published in The Bengal Magazine. It goes to Toru’s credit that she recognised the worth of then unrecognised Derozio. It is also quite certain that Toru was inspired by Derozio’s nationalism and romanticism. In Derozio, Toru must have discovered a precedent whom she could follow and possibly excel, which she certainly did. In 1875, The Bengal Magazine published Toru’s translations of two speeches by Victor Hugo and M. Thiers, delivered in the French Parliament, under the title, "A Scene from Contemporary History." The translations are evidence of Toru’s amazing linguistic abilities. Her later publications, namely, A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields, Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan, two of her novels, fragmentary romance Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden, and the complete French novel Le Journal de Mademoiselle d’Arvers, firmly placed Toru among the who’s who of contemporary litterateurs. Noted French critic and author James Darmesteter succinctly observes:

This daughter of Bengal, so admirably and so strangely gifted, Hindu by race and tradition, an Englishwoman by education, a Frenchwoman at heart, poet in English, prose writer in French; who
at the age of eighteen made India acquainted with the poets of France in the rhyme of England, who blended in herself three souls and three traditions, and died at the age of twenty (sic), in the full bloom of her talent and on the eve of the awakening of her genius, presents in the history of literature a phenomenon without parallel. Toru was a linguist prodigy who performed the tricks of a magician by deftly handling three languages often translating one from another. As a translator, she did not slavishly follow the original; hers was too individualistic a personality to be suppressed. The poetry of Toru Dutt is truly an index of her personality. In actuality, she does not merely translate but trans-creates, and in the process of trans-creation, she reveals herself.

3.1 Nostalgic Elements—Projection of Idealised Self

Poetic musings of Toru Dutt show bipolar aspects of her personality. She built upon her essentially Indian sensibility and expressed it in a language she had internalised thoroughly. No wonder then M.K. Naik feels, "with Toru Dutt (1856-77) [...] Indian poetry really graduated from imitation to authenticity." Toru Dutt can be said to be a representation of that aspect of Indian creative writer which while being open to multi-cultural, multi-ethnic influences, has an instinctive tendency to assimilate that experience and then modify and express it in an idiom that despite being alien, articulates a sensibility that is deeply personal and fundamentally Indian. Toru’s biography shows that experiences she assimilated during her travels manifested when the time was ripe. Death of her elder brother Abju in 1865, her stay in France and England, death of her elder sister Aru in 1874, all find reflection in her works. Probably, the death of her elder sister Aru
and a foreboding of her own fast approaching end expedited the process of self revelation. One of the translated poems in the Sheaf Parny's "On the Death of a Young Girl," expresses the poetess's complete resignation in face of death:

Though childhood's ways were past and gone,
   More innocent no child could be;
Though grace in every feature shone,
   Her maiden heart was fancy free.

A few more months, or haply days,
   And love would blossom,—so we thought;
As lifts in April's genial rays
   The rose its clusters richly wrought.

But God had destined otherwise,
   And so she gently fell asleep,
A creature of the starry skies,
   Too lovely for earth to keep.

She died in earliest womanhood;
   Thus dies, and leaves behind no trace,
A bird's song in a lonely wood—
   Thus melts a sweet smile from a face.5

Whether love had begun to blossom in Toru's heart, and whether she considered herself one "too lovely for earth to keep," is something that must always remain in the realm of conjectures. However, if we take a look at her prose works, we find

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5 Since this is a translation, the original text may vary slightly from the printed version.
that Toru could manipulate autobiographical material and put it to creative use. The story of her incomplete novel Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden, borders closely on her own life.

Alonzo Garcia is a Spanish immigrant in England. He lives with his daughters with a modest income from an undisclosed source. He speaks with an accent and conducts himself rather self-consciously in society for fear of being labelled a 'husband grabbing father.' As the story opens, Garcia's favourite daughter Inez has died. Garcia is returning from the cemetery with his other daughter, eighteen year old Bianca, who though less favoured, is more spirited of the two. Apparently there had been other children, but they have all died. Garcia is now particularly forlorn, anxious, and agitated, because Bianca is now equally his support and his burden. She is a free spirited woman, bold enough to walk alone in the dark with a pistol concealed in her cloak. At the same time, she is an enthusiastic reader of verse, amiable with children, and graceful in society. She is no beauty, in fact, her dark complexion, black curls, and deep eyes give her a gypsy-like appearance. This combination of restraint and suggested wildness attracts the attention of Lord Moore, the most eligible bachelor in the neighbourhood. Bianca's father and Lord Moore's mother oppose the blossoming friendship on the ground that a marriage between the two would be unsuitable across the barriers of race and class. Bianca, though heart broken at her father's authoritarian control over her choice, obeys him. Soon however, she passes into delirious fever. The novel has extensive descriptions of Bianca's illness and her depressive state of mind. Lord Moore's resolve to marry Bianca is sharpened by these obstacles. The father and the suitor keep an anxious watch at the sick-bed and come to recognise each other's possessiveness towards Bianca. By the time
Bianca recovers, she and Lord Moore have Garcia's permission to marry, but Lady Moore is disconsolate. Events intercede, and the marriage is postponed because Lord Moore must proceed to fight in the Crimean War. Before he goes away, Lord Moore takes a ring and puts it on Bianca's finger. The unfinished novel terminates at this point. Govin Chunder Dutt appended a short footnote to this novel which runs thus:

The gentle hand that had traced the story so far,—the hand of Miss Toru Dutt,—left off here. Was it illness that made the pen drop from the weary fingers? I do not know. I think not. The sketch was a first attempt probably, and abandoned. I am inclined to think so because the novel left in the French language is very much superior indeed to this fragment and is complete. Other fragments there are both in prose and verse but mostly rough hewn and unpolished.6

The French novel which Govin Chunder speaks about is Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers. Originally published in French by Didier in 1879, the novel has recently been translated in English by N. Kamala and published by Penguin Books India under the title The Diary of Mademoiselle D'Arvers. Title page of the original French volume bore the following inscription:

O dying voice of human praise!

The crude ambitions of my youth!

I long to pour immortal lays,

Great paeans of perennial truth!

A larger wish! A loftier aim! . . .

And what are laurel leaves and fame?7
Autobiographical element is strong even in this short passage. The novel is in form of a diary written by a young lady, Marguerite, and covers a period of about a year and a half. The novel begins as Marguerite d'Arvers, the only child of a retired General and his wife, leaves the convent after many happy years and joins her parents' to celebrate her fifteenth birthday. At her birthday party she meets friends she had known in her childhood, Madame Goserelle and her daughter, the widowed Countess of Plonarven and her two sons Dunois and Gaston. Three days later, a young officer, Louis Lefevre, the orphan son of old friends of Marguerite's parents', comes to visit the d'Arvers. Marguerite passes her days in walks with her father, in tending her domestic pets, and in visiting the poor and the old in the neighbouring villages. She secures a place for one of the village girls', Jeannette, as lady's maid to the Countess. Afterwards, Marguerite herself pays a visit to the Countess at her chateau and is accorded a warm welcome there.

Marguerite's parents' want her to marry Louis. When the young officer solicits her, she refuses him. She has fallen in love with Count Dunois, and the Countess is very happy to discover this fact. Dunois and Gaston however, are both in love with Jeannette. Deranged by passion, Dunois shoots his brother. On regaining his sanity, Dunois becomes aware of his crime and also of Marguerite's love for him. Dunois is sentenced to fifteen years of hard labour. Afflicted by these developments, Marguerite falls seriously ill and lingers near death for some time. On her recovery, she learns that Dunois has committed suicide in another fit of insanity and that the Countess has lost her mental stability in consequence. Louis visits Marguerite during her convalescence and she yields to his steadfast love and to her parents' wishes. After marriage, the young couple leave for Nice.
to enable Marguerite recoup her strength. There, in due course, she is expectant. They return to Brittany, and a son is born to the delight of all. As an anti-climax to this state of happiness, Marguerite falls ill and passes away. Her death is pathetic and is effectively sketched in few words:

'May God keep us in his care,' she sighed.

It was her habit since childhood to say this prayer before sleeping.

She closed her eyes; her lips half opened, and her pure soul flew away to her God's bosom, and Marguerite slept the sleep of death.8

The end passage of *Le Journal* reveals to us the authoress who is more inclined to shadows than to sunshine, and who has premonitions of a premature demise. It has been pointed out that the character of Marguerite is little too mature for her age. Her deep faith in providence, her unflinching religious spirit, and her calm resignation are such as may be associated with a woman of advanced age and not with a girl still in her teens. To counter such criticism, it only needs to be pointed that the authoress herself was a young girl who exhibited all such qualities and hence such a character is not improbable. Critics have also noted the character of Marguerite to be self-centred in her actions. Furthermore, it has been said that the account of Jeannette is not fully presented, and that the expected birth of the child is over-elaborated. However, since the novel is cast in the form of a diary, it is not incongruous for it to have subjective impressions rather than descriptive accounts.

The plot of *Le Journal*, like that of *Bianca*, is simple. The story is told skilfully and sustains the reader's interest throughout. When two possible claimants for Marguerite's hand first appear on scene, the reader can not tell which one has the right to Marguerite's affections. Later on, after Marguerite has
refused Louis, and there appears an obstacle in the union between Marguerite and Dunois, only stray hints are thrown that all is not well with Dunois. Yet, the exact nature of the trouble is so well concealed that the tragic denouement is one which both shocks and surprises the reader. The young writer's genius is well evident in the narration of the scene after the murder. The tragedy deepens at this point, yet it is not gruesome. There are no ghastly details, no sordid narratives. In keeping with this, details of Dunois's trial are glossed over and only the verdict is mentioned. Similarly, little space is given over to the love affair between Jeannette and the two brothers, which instigated the crime. Le Journal shows no penchant for low intrigues as may be found in ordinary French novels of the day. There are passages in the novel which exhibit "a highly developed imaginative faculty and poetic thought." The madman's dream of his brother lying dead, with his eyes staring at him, while from the motionless lips issued the hoarse cry of "Cain," is a brilliant conception. The book has many artistic settings and Toru's scenic descriptions are especially fine; they are not marred by exuberance of verbiage or thought.

Both Bianca and Le Journal are rich in personal elements. Though Bianca does not present either an element of structural finesse or that of completeness, yet it has an important place in the history of Indo-Anglian literature; it being the first novel written in English by an Indian woman. In fact, it is the first novel written in English by an Indian. The novel is an understated narrative of a complex father-daughter relationship. Toru deserves attention as the first Indian prose writer who made novel the mode of her creative expression drawing sustenance form her own experiences. Bianca may be taken as a projection of self as it might have been had Toru not returned back to India. Bianca's most
distinctive quality is her escape from class compartmentalisation, both Spanish and English. She transcends any single social code. Her strong willed cultivation of personal freedom and urge for creative expression made her stand out from her compatriots—just as Toru did. In Bianca we have a pen portrait of the authoress herself:

She was not beautiful; of the middle height; her slight figure was very graceful; her face was not quite oval; her forehead was low; her lips were full, sensitive and mobile; her colour was dark; have you ever seen an Italian peasant girl? When she blushed or was excited, the colour mounted warm and deep on her pale olive cheek; she was beautiful then; her dark brown eyes [. . .] were large and full; in fact this pair of eyes and her long black curls were her only points of beauty. 10

This description of Bianca may be compared with Toru's own portrait which dates back to the last part of her stay in England. The picture shows a pair of dark, deep eyes, a cascade of dark hair, and a firm mouth. In the portrait, Toru is wearing a Victorian dress, an embossed cross hangs from a chain from her neck. The attire is of an English woman of culture and piety; the face is of a woman of non-white race, alert and intelligent. Perhaps Toru wished to embody her own self as she was in the picture, in her work.

Toru yearned to be back in England and this is amply evident from the letters she wrote to her Cambridge friend Mary Martin. In her letter dated 11 May 1874, she wrote, "We all want so much to return to England. We miss the free life we led there; here we can hardly go out of the limits of our own garden. [. . .]." In the same letter, she again wrote, "How gay Cambridge would be during the whole
of this month. I would like to be there now."11 The tug from England was to remain strong throughout her remaining days. In October 1876 she wrote, "As you say, it would indeed be very nice to have readings together on our return to England. (Will that ever be?)"12 Perhaps Toru’s insistence had a role in Govin Chunder contemplating a return to England. However that may be, as late as in December 1876, she wrote with enthusiasm, "The doctors are of the opinion that we should go to England, as that would be the best thing for me, they say."13 However, before long, it became apparent that a voyage to England any time soon would be improbable and Toru wrote, "It may be that after all we shall be unable to start for Europe [. . . ] going to Europe again with broken health and spirits is no small matter and requires a great deal of thought."14 Though arrangements to settle in England for good after disposing off the property in Baugmaraee were often debated in the Dutt household, nothing tangible ever ensued. Toru was acutely disappointed each time the plan dithered. Her way of taking in disappointment was to write long, chatty letters to her friend Mary. Privately, she wove the story of Bianca and Marguerite.

Bianca is, in some ways, Toru’s commentary on the nature of woman’s solitude, as well as it is her effort to understand father-daughter relationship in context of cultural flux. The nineteenth century English society served as a model for Toru; a society which though comparatively liberal, yet disallowed its talented women to exert a choice of their own. Like Bianca, Toru too was in a piquant situation. Born in an anglophile family and converted to Christianity at an early age, Toru enjoyed a freedom which most of her contemporaries could not even dream of; yet she felt constrained. In her, there was a continuous struggle between the need to conform to social decorum and the natural instinct to break
free from all shackles. Though she subscribed to social etiquettes in every manner possible, inwardly she knew her mind. Intensely analytical, Toru could penetrate the veil between ostensible sophistication as a means of external adornment, and centuries old mental block which remained at the core of her countrymen. An incident narrated by Toru in one of her letters will serve as an example to the above statement. The Prince of Wales visited Calcutta in 1875 amid much show of opulence and festivity. A Bengali Brahmin pleader Juggodanundo Mukherjee, invited the Prince to meet the womenfolk of his family. This unprecedented trespass of social convention became the subject of a heated debate. His detractors saw him as an impious Hindu and a political sycophant. His supporters lauded his progressive attitude. Toru ended her narrative saying:

If the Babu means to bring out his family, as in English society every European does, and let his friends visit and mingle with his family, as be­hoves civilized men and manners, he is a very well-meaning man, and his aims are very laudable; but if he has only made an exception for the Prince and his suite, and means to 'lock up' his wife and family, as all Hindus do, his allowing the Prince to visit his family is a bit of flunkeyism, quite unpardonable, and worthy of highest disapprobation.¹⁵

Restlessness in face of social constraints, which Toru revealed in her letters, is articulated in Bianca as well. Bianca's refusal to act according to accepted social norms causes her to be somewhat distanced from her father. Her drift from community occurs due to her undefined class positioning. Like Bianca, Toru too was not the favoured child, though she was undoubtedly the most
admired one. A passage from *Bianca* reads like a description of the Dutt household:

> [Garcia] loved both his daughters, but Inez with her childlike grace, her utter dependence on him, her caressing ways, had been his best loved [. . .] He would say, [of Bianca] 'beneath girl's bodice beats a heart as bold as any man's, beneath her wavy curls was a head as sharp and intelligent as any mathematicians'. [. . .] 'After all, he loves Inez best,' Bianca would think awake in her bed, 'and was not that right? Inez wants to be looked after [. . .] I should not be jealous; I am strong; I can take care of myself.'

Autobiographical aspect to be noted in the passage above is that Aru, who according to Govin Chunder was, "brow and blushing cheek / Her nature shows serene, and pure, and mild / As evening's early star," served as a prototype for the character of Inez. A point of critical interest here is that Toru questions traditional gender psychology whereby a 'strong' woman is admired, but it is the delicate one who calls forth love and protectiveness. For all his enchantment, Lord Moore thinks of Bianca as a 'wild Spanish girl.' The romantic episode is not the focus of interest in the novel. Rather, Toru's focus is on the articulation of rebel tendencies of a woman. Thought processes evolve within the woman and direct her choices which are in conflict with social consensus. She may be unable to act upon these choices, but the very awareness of them is significant.

It is notable that Toru never mentioned the novels in her letters to Miss Mary Martin; her friend to whom she poured her heart out. The obsession of premature death must have possessed Toru and she wrote the novels in secret not caring to mourn aloud her personal tragedies. It was through the characters
of Marguerite and Bianca that Toru was able to give vent to some of her pent-up feelings. What engrosses the reader of Le Journal is not its plot or melodrama, but the source of Marguerite's development and her early death, a fate which is so like the author's own. Craving for motherhood evinced by Marguerite may well have been Toru's own longing for health and long life, to marry and bear children. Though Toru is not known to have been in love with any one, her novels may be taken as a subconscious projection of her feminine instinct for love and for a family. It may also be pointed that the last part of Bianca, which has an account of the heroine's mental breakdown, following her inability to come to terms with conflicting loyalties between the father and the suitor, has an indirect but a vital link with Toru's last years. Toru was repeatedly disappointed in her ambition to be in England. Diagnosed with consumption, a foreboding of death engulfed her. Amid such circumstances, Toru searched for a deeper meaning of life. Since she could not find them in her immediate proximity, and constricted by social conventions, she began to study Sanskrit with the hope of realising answers to the questions of life and after-life. With an unmatched zeal, she lapped up the treasures of Sanskrit classics. She was specially attracted by the tales of mythological heroines—Uma, Sita, and Savitri. Thus began Toru's journey to gather 'a sheaf gleaned in Sanskrit fields.'

James Darmesteter and Edmund Gosse compared Toru Dutt with great women novelists of the day. Toru herself was much taken by the sad life of Bronte sisters; after reading Mrs. Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Bronte, she wrote to Mary, "To think of those three young sisters in that old parsonage, among the lonely wild moors of Yorkshire, all three so full of talent, and yet living so solitary amid those Yorkshire wolds!" The character of Marguerite or Bianca is very like
the heroines of Bronte sisters. Gentle manners and fatalistic outlook, which typify the Victorian heroines, are also predominant in Toru’s characters. The similarity between her style and those of Jane Austen or George Eliot are unmistakable. However, Toru was no copycat. To develop the character of her heroines she drew upon the fount of her own experience as much as she did upon the works of her contemporaries and predecessors. She foreshadowed her own sad fate when she wrote of Bronte sisters, “How dreary for the father to see one by one all his children die, and to live on alone and infirm, in that solitary parsonage in Yorkshire! In truth there is no greater tragedy in fiction than what happens in our real, daily life.”\textsuperscript{19} She also considered the words of Barrett Browning to be appropriate with regard to the Brontes, shortly afterwards, the words proved true to her own self:

Oh, my God,

Thou hast knowledge, only Thou,

How dreary ‘tis for women to sit still

On winter nights by solitary fires

And hear the nations praising them far off.\textsuperscript{20}

3.2 Romantic Elements—The Lyrical and The Picturesque

As a poetess, says Prof. Iyengar, Toru Dutt "Compels attention."\textsuperscript{21} The most striking aspect of Toru’s poetry is its lyrical impulse. There is a sweep in her lines and a melody in her verse:

Past all houses, past the wall,

Past gardens gay, and hedgerows trim,

Past fields, where sinuous brooklets small
With molten silver to the brim
Glance in the sun’s expiring light,
Past frowning hills, past pastures wild,
At last arises on sight,
Foliage on foliage densely piled,
The woods primeval, where reside
The holy hermits

The above passage from "Savitri" is remarkable for its musical exposition of tender feelings. It describes joyous marriage procession marching along the streets of Madra. The juncture of narrative is such as to render the poetess lyrical and effusive in her expression and this is unmistakable in her adoption of repetitive device. Toru was also adept in delineating sights and scenes of nature. The champak, the lotus, and the kokila ever aroused rhapsodic melodies in her. Like Keats, her heart leapt with an unspeakable joy and her lips quivered with ecstasy on beholding a spectacular vista:

Upon the glassy surface fell
The last beams of the day,
Like fiery darts, that lengthening swell,
As breezes wake and play.

Osiers and willows on the edge
And purple buds and red,
Leant down, — 'mid the pale green sedge
The lotus raised its head.
And softly, softly, hour by hour
Light faded, and a veil
Fell over tree, and wave, and flower,
On came the twilight pale. (pp. 61-62)

During her short life Toru Dutt had mastered the sonnet form. Two of her sonnets "Baugmaree" and "The Lotus" are fine examples of pure romanticism. The sonnet "Baugmaree," and consequently the garden house which inspired the sonnet, attracted so much attention throughout her life and after, that many visitors both home and abroad wished to visit it. Miss Elizabeth S. Colton, an American lady, was one such admirer of Toru Dutt. In December 1907, thirty years after Toru's death, she came to visit India and wrote a letter to one of the surviving relatives of Toru expressing her desire to see the Baugmaree Garden House, she wrote:

My Dear Sir,—For years I have regarded Calcutta as a place sacred to the memory of the gifted Toru Dutt, and I have come to see if possible the home where she lived and left to a sorrowing world so few but precious hints of her great genius.

I should like to see the Garden-House where, as Mr. Edmund Gosse expresses it, she plunged into the mysterious depths of Sanskrit literature.22

The much regarded sonnet deserves full quotation:

A sea of foliage girds our garden round,
But not a sea of dull unvaried green,
Sharp contrasts of all colors here are seen;
The light-green graceful tamarinds abound
Amid the mango clumps of green profound,
And palms arise, like pillars gray, between;
And o'er the quiet pools the seemuls lean,
Red—red, and startling like a trumpet's sound.

But nothing can be lovelier than the ranges
Of bamboos to the eastward, when the moon
Looks through their gaps, and the white lotus changes
Into a cup of silver. One might swoon

Drunk.en with beauty then, or gaze and gaze
On a primeval Eden, in amaze.

(p. 465)

In describing the garden, Toru adopts a simple diction and a free rhythm. Lotika Basu is of the opinion that in this poem Toru shows a "maturer genius." E.J. Thompson says: "Nothing [ . . . ] could be finer or more vivid than the line on the seemuls in blossom, in the Baugmaree sonnet:

Red,—red, and startling like a trumpet's sound."

On the face of it, "Baugmaree" is a childlike, felicitous description of a garden— a sea of green, contrasting colours, tamarinds, mangoes, palms, seemuls, bamboos, and lotus— eleven lines of realistic details. Despite the detailing, there is an overarching sense of grace, peace, and mystery. The poem achieves a fine balance between emotion and technique leading to the epiphanic "amaze." For this to become possible, Toru Dutt sets up visual and semantic polarities that aid the transformation of the consciousness of self from mere onlooker to enraptured gazer. Greens of tamarinds and mangoes are startled by red seemul's trumpet sound. Grey pillars of palm are offset by the white lotus that metamorphoses into a cup of silver. The turning point of the sonnet is the word
“changes” in the eleventh line, when the garden, essentially a patch of cultivated green, is liberated into the possibilities of the Edenic. Toru’s letter to Miss Mary Martin on 13 May 1876, illustrates how she could use personal and cultural dimensions of her experience in her work, she writes:

The moonlight nights are so beautiful and silent and peaceful in the Garden. It is a beautiful sight to see the moon rising large, serenely bright, full, behind the tall palm trees. She seems a peaceful watcher sent to watch over our lonely Garden; for Baugmaree is a little lonely and very quiet. At nights when I wake, it is so strange and beautiful to look at the moonlight on the floor of my room. [. . .]

Calcutta is such a horrid place, socially and morally; backbiting and scandal are in full swing. But the dear Garden, dear old Baugmaree, is free from every grievance, so quiet and peaceful; I asked papa which was the place he would like to live his days out in; he answered, ‘Baugmaree or St. Leonards’; I quite agree with him.25

“The Lotus” is a quaint little story of the birth of that flower. To end the strife as to whether the lily or the rose was the queen of flowers, Psyche went to Flora and asked for a flower having the qualities of them both and thus was born the lotus:

Love came to Flora asking for a flower

That would of flowers be undisputed queen,

The lily and the rose, long, long had been

Rivals for that high honor. Bards of power

Had sung their claims. “The rose can never tower
Like the pale lily with her Juno mein" —

“But is the lily lovelier?” Thus between

Flower-factions rang the strife in psyche’s bower.

“Give me a flower delicious as the rose
And stately as the lily in her pride” —

“But of what color?” — “Rose-red,” love first chose,

Then prayed— “No, lily-white—or, both provide;”

And Flora gave the lotus, “rose-red” dyed,

And “lily-white”— the queenliest flower that blows. (p. 465)

Beauty of the poem lies in its child-like simplicity which subtly camouflages the fusion of passion and ascetic withdrawal as symbolised by rose-red and lily-white. The dual aspect of Indian philosophy— that of involvement and detachment, as symbolised by the lotus, which while remaining in water yet remains unaffected by it, is well conceptualised by the young poetess. The genius of a poet who could produce a sonnet such as this while she barely crossed her teens is indeed something to be marvelled at.

Finely tuned senses of Toru could appreciate nature not only for its superficial splendour but also for its soothing effect on the human spirit. Long descriptive passages in the ballad “Buttoo,” illustrating the sights and scenes of Indian forest, which have often been criticised as being superfluous, in fact, serves to reiterate her belief in nature’s power to heal the wounded soul. Humiliated by the unrivalled master of archery Dronacharjya, and jeered at by the Pandava and the Kuru princes, Buttoo found harmony of soul in the company of nature and he resolved to attain perfection by learning from animate and inanimate creations of the natural world:
“A calm, calm life, — and it shall be
Its own exceeding great reward!
No thoughts to vex in all I see,
No jeers to bear or disregard; —
All creatures and inanimate things
Shall be my tutors: I shall learn
From beast, and fish, and bird with wings
And rock, and stream, and trees, and fern.” (p. 53)

Toru Dutt’s descriptions of nature are noted for minute observation and extreme sensitiveness to colour. Undeniably, had she been granted a longer life, she would have ranked as a great landscape artist in Indo-Anglian poetry. Her nature versification has an important place in the history of Indo-Anglian poetry. Nature had only a shallow appeal to her predecessors—Derozio, Kashiprasad Ghosh, and Michael Madhusudan Dutt. For the first time we find genuine sensitiveness towards nature in the poetry of Toru Dutt. Her attitude towards nature is not pantheistic; rather, it provides a background for the revelation of profound human emotions. On her way to the hermitage Savitri fell in love at first sight with Satyavan, and joy permeated her being. The sylvan environs reflected her state of mind even before her tongue uttered it:

A ray,

Shot down from heaven, appeared to tinge

All objects with supernal light,

The thatches had a rainbow fringe,

The cornfields looked more green and bright. (p. 3)
Nature seems to be in tune with the vicissitudes of Savitri. Deft delineation of the forest in evening as Savitri and Satyavan venture out on the fateful day is worth the note:

Oh, lovely are the woods at dawn,
And lovely in the sultry noon,
But loveliest, when the sun withdrawn
The twilight and a crescent moon
Change all asperities of shape,
And tone all colours softly down,
With a blue veil of silvered crape!
Lo! By that hill which palm-trees crown,
Down the deep glade with perfume rife
From buds that to the dews expand,
The husband and the faithful wife
Pass to dense jungle, --- hand in hand. (p. 14)

The lovely evening speaks in a restrained voice as if anticipating the climatic moment of Satyavan's death.

In the ballad "Sindhu," approaching twilight is a fitting background for approaching calamity in form of the death of the young child and then of his sage parents which finally set the stage for numerous trials and tribulations for the mighty king Dasarath and later his son Lord Rama:

And softly, softly, hour by hour
Light faded and a veil
Fell over tree, and wave, and flower,
On came the twilight pale.
Deeper and deeper grew the shade,
Stars glimmered in the sky,
The nightingale along the glade
Raised her preluding cry.

[.................................]
As darkness settled like a pall
The eye would pierce in vain,
The fireflies gemmed the bushes all,
Like fiery drops of rain. 

Another predominantly romantic element in Toru's poetry is the concurrence of personal recollections and natural elements. This aspect is well illustrated in the "Miscellaneous Poems" of the Ancient ballads. The first among these, "Near Hastings," is a record of an incident in Toru's life when she was in England. One day, resting on the beach near Hastings, Toru and Aru—the elder then sick and weak, were met by a lady who stopped by for a friendly conversation, and before departing, offered some beautiful roses to Aru. This act of spontaneous display of love won undying gratitude of Toru. Account of the beach landscape, the blending of mood and locale, and the poet's firm anchorage in her native clime; all come through the poem beautifully:

Far off—the sea and sky seemed blent,
The day was wholly done,
The distant town its murmurs sent;
Strangers—we were alone.
We wandered slow; sick, weary, faint,
Then one of us sat down,
No nature hers, to make complaint;—
The shadows deepened brown.

[..........................]
We talked awhile—some roses red
That seemed as wet with tears,
She gave my sister, and she said,
*God bless you both, my dears!*"}

Sweet were the roses—sweet and full,
And large as lotus flowers
That in our own wide tanks we cull
To deck our Indian bowers.

(p. 461)

Though technically the poem is not of as high order as "The Lotus" or "Our Casuarina Tree," it is nevertheless a heartfelt composition. The poem has Toru's characteristic clarity and simplicity of style, a lucidity of diction, and a fine rhythm.

"Our Casuarina Tree" is the most anthologised poem of Toru Dutt. The casuarina tree—tall, its apex embracing the starry sky, is rugged and indented deep with scars. A massive wild creeper winding round and round the tree like a python hugs it in a vice-like grip. No other tree could have survived the strangulating grip, but the casuarina tree bears the creeper like a scarf. Beautiful crimson flower clusters on the branches add to its splendour. Unto these flowers are attracted an unending pageant of birds and bees all through the day. Often at
night, sweet music seeming to emanate from the tree fills the garden. The first stanza of the poem is thus a pictorial description of the tree.

The second stanza records Toru's impression of the tree. Every morning when Toru flings open her window, she is spell-bound by the tree's majesty and she watches the landscape coming to life before her eyes. Often during winter, a gray baboon sits statue-like on the crest watching the sunrise while its tiny offspring leap about and play on the lower boughs. Song-birds hail the day with gusto; meanwhile, Drowsy cattle are heading their way to pastures. Upon the water of the lucid lake beside the huge tree, water-lilies appear like "snow enmassed" (466). In the middle of this awakening and transformation, the casuarina tree alone remains unchanged.

The next two stanzas link the tree with Toru's memories of her lost brother and sister. The tree is so dear to her not because it is magnificent, but because of its association with her childhood when she played beneath it with her brother and sister. It is for their sake the tree shall ever remain dear to her memory. Hot tears roll down her eyes whenever she remembers the companions of childhood:

O sweet companions, loved with love intense,

For your sakes, shall the tree be ever dear!

Blent with your images, it shall arise

In memory, till the hot tears blind mine eyes! (p. 466)

Her fancy translates the soft murmuring sound coming from the tree to "dirge-like murmur" (466). Thus, the tree is in unison with Toru in lamenting over the loss of dear ones. This eerie lament of the tree may reach the unknown land where her erstwhile companions have reached. Though such a phenomenon may be unknown to the sceptic, it is commonplace to the one who has dauntless faith—
the poet is such a one. The tree's lamentations reached out to her even in far off
shores of France and Italy, during moonlit nights when the earth seemed calm, as
if in a trance. And whenever she heard the sweet-sad music, there arose in her
mind the sublime form of the casuarina tree as she remembered it from her
bygone happy days:

Thy form, O Tree, as in my happy prime
I saw thee, in my own loved native clime.   (p. 467)

With the humanizing of the casuarina tree, the fourth stanza becomes a "human
recordation of pain and regret."26

The last stanza wills for immortality of the tree. Toru consecrates a song
for the tree because it was loved by those departed souls who were dearer to her
than her own life. She wishes that the casuarina tree may be held among those
few trees which have been immortalised in literature, like the yew trees of
Borrowdale of whom Wordsworth sang so eloquently. Toru's allusion to
Wordsworth's yew trees reflects her wish for indirect self-fulfilment through the
casuarina tree. She however realises the inadequacy of her verse and aspires
that if not her verse then at least her love will confer it immortality. In a simple and
lucid tongue the poet is able to strike the right chord. Her sensuousness is
remarkable. The tree is a peg for the poet to hang on her feelings and loosen the
burden of her heart. She says, 'I don't have any claims to superlative poetry. My
poem may be weak, but my sentiment is genuine and profound.'

The poem has been acclaimed by one and all. Commenting on its
structure and sensibility, Dr. Iyengar writes:

The eleven line stanza form with the rhyme scheme abba, cddc,
eee is worthy of Keats himself. In the organisation of the poem as a
whole and in the finish of the individual stanzas, in its mastery of phrases and rhythm, in its music of sound and ideas, 'Our Casuarina Tree' is a superb piece of writing, and gives us a taste of what Toru might have done had not the race of her life been so quickly run.27

Harihar Das says, "For its rich imagery, the music of its verses, and the tenderness and pathos with which it is instinct, we would place this poem second to none in the volume."28 E.J. Thompson regards it as:

The most remarkable poem ever written in English by a foreigner, shows her already possessed of mastery over the more elaborate and architectural forms of verse. [. . .] one of the stanzas drops into conventionality, and uses adjectives and thought that are secondhand and otiose. But the poem's strength is independent of this; and its blending of pathos and dignity of spirit, its stretching out of ghostly arms to those other haunted trees of Wordsworth's in 'Borrowdale', the conclusion—so recalling the last work of another poet, far inferior in genius but dying equally young, Kirke White, in the touching close of his Christiad—all this forms a whole of remarkable strength and beauty, and should achieve her hope of placing the tree of her childhood's memories among those immortalised by

Mighty poets in their misery dead.29

S.V. Mukerjea views it as "one of the great architectural pieces in English poetry."30 Lotika Basu praises the poem for its "riper perfection."31 The poem will
always be remembered for its sweetness and structural perfection. Its diction is shorn of all crudities and the rhythm has an easy movement in it.

As may be observed, Toru had a passion for trees. The climax of her passion reaches in her last poem "The Tree of Life." Written from her sick-bed, the poem is a testimony of a rare mystic vision Toru had one day when she lay attended by her father. With eyes closed and an overwhelming sense of weariness, her hand in her father's, there flashed a strange light. Toru assures that she was awake:

I was awake:—It was an open plain
Illimitable—stretching, stretching—oh, so far!
And o'er it that strange light—a glorious light
Like that the stars shed over fields of snow
In a clear, cloudless, frosty winter night,
Only intenser in its brilliance calm.
And in the midst of that vast plain, I saw,
For I was wide awake—it was no dream,
A tree with spreading branches and with leaves
Of divers kinds—dead silver and live gold,
Shimmering in radiance that no words may tell!   (p. 463)

Beside the tree stood an angel who plucked a few sprigs and bound them into a coronet round her head. At their delicious touch, the fever in her limbs was gone.

She pleaded for a few to be bound round her father's forehead too, and:

One leaf the Angel took and therewith touched
His forehead, and then gently whispered "Nay!"   (P. 483)
She read "holy pity" and "love divine" on the angel's face. As she opened her eyes, the light was gone and the angel had disappeared. Through her "tear-dimmed" eyes she saw her father patiently watching by her bed.

Here again, Toru's favourite symbol—the tree appears. As with the casuarina tree, in this poem too the tree is a symbol of immortality. The vision of an angel placing a coronet on her head and the surge of bliss which it accompanied, suggests that Toru had a foreboding of her approaching end and a yearning for immortality. That in her moment of supreme bliss she should plead for her father to be blessed shows the acuity of her awareness of his lonely, grief-stricken existence after her death. Referring to this vision, Govin Chunder Dutt in a letter dated 16 April 1877 to Miss Mary Martin wrote:

Yester evening when the candles were lighted, Toru told me, in very low whispers and with some agitation, a dream or vision which she had the day previous 9 or 10 a.m. She was not asleep at all, but quite awake. I know now why she asked me the evening before, where the text was, "And I will give thee a crown of life."  

Toru's quiet acceptance of her imminent fate shows how deep ran her faith in God's ministration. In fact, the title of the poem is taken from a passage in the Bible, "And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil."  

Padmini Sen Gupta comments, "This poem, verging on the mystic, is in my mind the best of Toru's verse and the vision she sees is like Blake's peep into the world of divine love."  

Toru Dutt was a true child of Romanticism. Mlle Clarisse Bader attributes Toru's partiality for romantic poetry to her Indian birth and upbringing. It may
have been so, but it must also be recognised that Toru was essentially romantic in her temperament which was further aided by the arboreal surroundings of Baugmaree garden house. Fine tracery of leaves and moonbeam streaking through their gaps transported her to a romantic world of imagination. Her love for Romantic Poetry may also be linked to a family tradition. Her father, for example, had an intense love for nature which made him revere the poetry of Wordsworth. In her fascination for calm and serene nature, Toru too was a disciple of Wordsworth and Keats. Her Keatsian connection can be noticed in her poetic technique apart from her love for nature. The repetitious use of a word to “fill up the requisite number of syllables in a line” as in:

(i) It was that fatal, fatal speech
(ii) A gleam of faint, faint hope is born

are sometimes a deliberate imitation of Keats. In Savitri, Toru follows the Keatsian technique of beginning a stanza with a word that appears at the end of the previous one:

— henceforth here

Must live the fair and gentle bride:

But this thought brought with it no fear.

Fear! With her husband by her still?

Or weariness! Where all was new?

Hark! What a welcome from the hill!

There gathered are a hermits few. (pp. 8-9)

The above reminds of the technique employed by Keats in “Ode to a Nightingale:”
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path

Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,

She stood in tears amid the alien corn;

The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam

Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! The very word is like a bell

To toll me back from thee to my sole self!

Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well

As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.\(^{37}\)

In a hurry of composition, with death knocking at the door, Toru had an affinity with Keats. E.J. Thompson rightly comments, "She heard, as Lowell surmises that Keats did, a voice urging 'What thou doest, do quickly'; and, especially after her sister's death, she plunged into work with energy and restlessness."\(^{38}\)

The dominant lyric note in Toru's poetry may be traced to several factors—her inherent musical gifts and predominantly soft feelings, her intimate study of the French Romantics, and the tragedies she had to face in her own short life, which consequently turned her introspective and made her look back on past with nostalgia, and finally, there was the impact of her study of Sanskrit, a tongue which lends itself intrinsically to lyrical compositions, and which Toru studied with an unabashed zeal. As a romantic poet, Toru's sterling quality lies in her mastery in delineating the landscape of Gangetic plains with a Keats-like sensuousness and sensitivity to colour and form. As a landscape painter, she stands above all other nineteenth century Indo-Anglian poets. It would not be an over-statement to
say that if blessed with a fuller life, Toru Dutt would have had a privileged place beside the great romantic poets.

3.3 Modern Temper—Breaking Free

Primarily a poet of the romantic tradition, Toru Dutt stands apart from preceding Indo-Anglian poets as she transcended rigid orientalist conventions that straitjacketed the earlier versifiers. Rosinka Chaudhuri notes:

The language she uses transforms the mythological content in her poems with their individual, and essentially modern, voice. Her modernism is evident from the way the mythological content of her poems does not remain extrinsic to her work as in the case of her predecessors, but is internalized in a consciousness that she both invokes and invigorates as she creates her own style. 39

Thus, in "Savitri" Toru raises her voice for women’s freedom when she contrasts the mythic past with the degenerate present:

In those far-off primeval days
Fair India’s daughters were not pent
In closed zenanas. On her ways
Savitri at her pleasure went
Whither she chose, — and hour by hour
With young companions of her age,
She roamed the woods for fruit or flower (p. 1)

Toru was deeply observant and her reflections on the problems of Indian social life are often pithily brought out in her poetry:
"And think upon the dreadful curse

Of widowhood; the vigils, fasts

And penances; no life is worse

Than hopeless life, — the while it lasts.

Day follows day in one long round,

Monotonous and blank and dear;

Less painful were it to be bound

On some bleak rock, for aye to hear —

Without one chance of getting free —

The ocean’s melancholy voice!

Mine be the sin, — if sin there be,

But thou must make a different choice." (p. 6)

Toru’s impatience at social restrictions as have been often articulated in her letters to Miss Mary Martin has already been noted in the chapter.

Toru gave a modern turn to some of her lays, and though her attempt at modernisation has been frowned upon by critics, they do add a new dimension to the ancient legends. Thus, the story of Prahlad suggests a political moral which might well have served as a motto for a Parisian mob in the French revolution:

The echoes rang from hill to hill,

"Kings rule for us and in our name."

Tyrants of every age and clime

Remember this, — that awful shape

Shall startle you when comes the time,

And send its voice from cape to cape,
As human peoples suffer pain,
But oh, the lion strength is theirs,
Woe to the king when galls the chain!
Woe, woe their fury when he dares!

Another aspect of advancement in poetic craft achieved by Toru is exemplified in “Sita.” The poem, instead of narrating the ancient legend, focuses on the familial scene where it is narrated by a mother to her three children. A point worth noting about the poem is its prosodic innovativeness. This aspect of Toru’s verse was noted, albeit unappreciatively, by Sir Edmund Gosse in his “Introductory Memoir.” He wrote, “the English verse is sometimes exquisite; at other times the rules of our prosody are absolutely ignored, and it is obvious that the Hindoo poetess was chanting to herself a music that is discord in an English ear.” In view of this statement, it may be argued that what Sir Gosse found discordant, was in fact, a bold attempt by the poetess to move away from the constraints of conventional metrics to find an Indian voice. “Sita” seems to be notably successful in this regard. Of a total of 110 metrical feet, seventy five are iambic, eighteen are pyrrhic, ten are trochaic, and seven are spondaic. The result is a subtly cadenced poem in which prosodic liberties taken are balanced by a neat rhyme scheme.

Thus, it may reasonably be concluded that in choosing the legends of the past, Toru was simply feeding, as the modern poet-critic believes, the present, for anything creative can be built only on the edifice of tradition. A.N. Dwivedi correctly remarks, “Toru was one of the ‘modern’ poets drawing for her sources upon the popular tales of the past.”
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