Letters: Sharing with the Other, Fashioning her Self

[S]he has an unconquerable propensity to unite, join, connect together....

(Cixous 1994: 60).

The autobiographical form of the letter became an important mode of expression during the time of nationalism as it embodied the ideas and imagination that went into the making of the nation. Although a very private mode, the letters written by important nationalist personages carried ideas on the formation of the nation. The private self merged with the public life of the nation in men’s letters. Women’s letters even in this period were an important and useful outlet for venting emotion and experiences to a trusted friend who could understand and sympathize with their personal achievements, disappointments and frustrations. This was a space where a woman could confide freely to a friend or a relative, with whom she felt an affinity; it allowed her to re-perceive her experiences and find meaning and satisfaction in them. The advantages of the letter form were specially suited to woman in the later half of the nineteenth century and early half of the twentieth century as it offered her a space to articulate her innermost feelings and emotions in private.

The personal and intimate nature of women’s letters also make them more intersubjective; the addressee is thereby conscious of the recipient’s presence and draws on her sympathy. This is particularly true when she writes to someone with whom she feels an affinity and in whom she can confide. This mode of exchange helps in the fashioning of the subject as the other plays an important role in this development. Thus, in women’s letters the addressee is dominant and the addressee
is engaged in a dialogue with him or her. On the other hand, in man’s letters the addressee is only a plea for expressing his own thoughts. On conducting an analysis of spoken discourse based on the utterance of male and female subjects, Irigaray observes two types of utterances in man and woman. The typical sentence produced by a male, is “I wonder if I am loved or: I tell myself that perhaps I am loved” while the woman would speak thus: “Do you love me?” (Irigaray 1993:134). Irigaray observes that in the first sentence the subject is autonomous and there is no place for the other. In the second sentence it is the “yes or no” of the “you”, the object, that underlines the meaning of the utterance, and the only subject of utterance is the person addressed. Women’s penchant of confiding and sharing her experiences with an other is especially suited to the letter form. Satya P. Mohanty comments that experience by itself is not a reliable source of knowledge and cannot be seen as grounding a social identity (Mohanty 2001:30). It is only in mediated ways that personal experience acquires new meanings. When a woman transmits her own experiences to another, she comes to know something “not merely about her repressed feelings but also about her self, her personhood, and the range of its moral and political claims and needs” (Mohanty 2001:36). This gives a new subjectivity to her self as she learns to re-analyze her situation. In studying the letters of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu in this chapter, I will keep in view the difference in language use between men and women as indicated by Irigaray, and also take into account how selves are formed or articulated in the process of opening up to another, and how such exchanges function when women are involved.

This chapter will study the feminine self in the exchange of letters between Toru Dutt and Mary Martin. It will go on to demonstrate the predominance of
feelings and emotions in the letters of Sarojini Naidu. By locating these features in the letters of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, it will attempt to show how the act of writing letters helped these two women to fashion themselves. As against a discourse of nationalism, which was partially shaped in men’s letters, an alternative discourse of women in the nationalist movement made up of private experiences, is discernible in the letters of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. In order to establish this difference, this chapter will also examine some of the letters written by important nationalist figures like Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru to support its point.

Toru Dutt’s correspondence includes her four letters from England to her cousins Arun Chunder Dutt and Omesh Chunder Dutt, one letter written in Bengali to her cousin, Muktamala while in England and one hundred and fifty five letters written to her British friend Mary Martin after her return to India from Europe between 1873 and 1877. The letters to Mary Martin were written both from Toru Dutt’s city house in Manicktollah street, Calcutta, and the Baugmaree family house located in the suburbs of Calcutta. Her correspondence also includes three letters written to Clarissa Bader, the French historian, just before her death.

The letters of Sarojini Naidu can be divided into three phases that mark three eventful experiences of her life. The letters of the first stage were addressed to her lover and future husband Govindarajulu Naidu when she was a young girl studying in England. Sarojini Naidu’s poetic experiences are addressed to her mentors Edmund Gosse, Arthur Symons and her publisher William Heinemann from Hyderabad in what can be referred to as the letters of the second stage. Her entry into public life is recorded in the letters written to national figures like Mahatma
Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Besides these public letters in this third stage of her epistolary career, we also have a number of letters addressed to her daughters Leilamani and Padmaja Naidu.

Luce Irigaray’s theory of intersubjectivity is useful in understanding how the exchange of letters, especially where women, with their very special use of language and sympathetic attention to the other, are involved, contributes to the formation of the female subject. Lacan’s more famous theory embedded in “The Seminar on the Purloined Letter”, displays the patterns of intersubjective relationship in Edgar Allen Poe’s short story The Purloined Letter, and shows how subject positions give the subject a place from which to speak while the other becomes the object. Irigaray, however denies the subject object hierarchy itself, and therefore also the view that women are always objects to the male subject. In her essay “A Two-Subject Culture,” Luce Irigaray explains how the female subject privileges the relation with the other in a subject-subject relationship (Irigaray 2000: 152). She affirms that:

Women’s language... demonstrates a richness of its own which has nothing to envy in men’s language; and particularly a taste for intersubjectivity which is definitely not to be abandoned in favour of the subject-object relation dear to men.

(Irigaray 2000:137).

The friendly correspondence or the fact that women could talk to each other and cultivate a process of exchange, that can activate a sisterhood amongst women is an aspect of such intersubjectivity. It helps to reveal emotion in the company of another woman, usually a friend or relative who is there to empathize and to act as confidante. It may be a sisterly or a motherly instinct with which the woman can identify. A woman’s emotion is given definition through the act of sharing.
In Toru Dutt’s letters, the “other” as represented by her friend Mary Martin, plays a very important role in shaping different features of her self. The letters are a record of her daily life and experiences which she conveys to her friend. These gestures of sharing, show how the female subject “renounces being one and single; instead it respects the two in the intersubjective relation” (Irigaray 2000:139). The intersubjective relation opens up the horizons of the self rather than closing of the circle around the singular subject.

The personal element is nominal in men’s autobiographical writings during the nationalist struggle, and the letters read like polemics on the nation. The letter form in the hands of men was a continuation of the public discourse in the private as the representation of the self in the letters is not presented in isolation from the nation. This is more evident in Gandhi’s letters where no area of his life was sacrosanct as private; everything was surrendered to the will of the nation. These letters are built on a subject-object relationship while women’s letters follow the subject-subject relationship where the subject never takes hold of the other as its object. The letter form in the hands of women does not try “to seize, possess or reduce this object as in man, but leaves it subjective, still free” (Irigaray 1993:13).

I

The forms of autobiographical writings that emerged in the period of nationalism – autobiographies, letters and diaries – were distinct narratives of the nation. The journey of life which this form records is interlaced with the life of the nation to such an extent in men’s writings that it becomes difficult to distinguish between the private and public domains in their lives, as the nation variously shapes and intersects their lives. As the autobiographical writings of men are inextricably
bound with the destiny of the nation, the subject in the autobiographical writings of men becomes an agent in discourse and presents itself as discursive. The autobiographies of Gandhi *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1925) and Nehru’s *An Autobiography* (1936) present a discourse of nationalism; their writings link the narration of the self with the narration of the emergent nation as they use their lived experiences to imagine the nation. Gandhi’s autobiography is primarily concerned “with the pursuit of spiritual salvation and the moral instruction of his life may provide for others, not with unlocking his unconsciousness” (Arnold and Blackburn 2004: 20).

In his introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha states:

> What I want to emphasize in that large and liminal image of the nation … is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it.

(Bhabha 1990:1).

A study of the letters of Tagore and Gandhi show how even the personal experiences of their lives were usually focused outside and the important “facts” of their existence were external and public. For instance, in the letters written to their friends, wives, siblings, relatives and children, the emotions are secondary, almost non-existent. In a letter written in 1907 to his son-in-law Nagendranath Ganguly, who had gone to America to study agricultural science, Rabindranath Tagore writes:

> To know only agriculture is not enough; you must know America too. Of course if, in the process of knowing America, one begins to lose one’s identity and fall into the trap of becoming an Americanised person contemptuous of everything Indian, it is preferable to stay in a locked room. Those who are immature and weak-minded tend to lose their own identity when they go abroad and become spoilt-better for such people if they keep
to their own home environment. From childhood all of you have displayed a
typical Brahmo repugnance for other people's social customs and historical
traditions. I know of no worse superstition and prejudice – unless you drive
it from your mind, your foreign education will never benefit you fully.
Rammohan was a pioneer of the Brahmo Samaj and the first to travel to
England, but he preserved his patriotism intact.

(Tagore 2005: No.33:67).

Here there is no enquiry into the young man's feelings in a different
environment. The personal experience is not discussed in this letter; it is only
addressed as a take-off point. It is the mentor's voice which dominates and 
there is
no expression of personal feelings. And more importantly, he is intent not only on
educating his addressee but is directing his comments at an entire nation.

In one of the personal letters written by Rabindranath Tagore to his niece
Indira Devi Choudhurani on March 6, 1893, he goes on to talk about the cultural
dignity of the nation\(^2\). Even in a letter written to his wife Mrinalini on June 1898, it
is the ideals involving the making of the nation which are important. He writes to
her that the need of the country precedes all other needs:

These days the only yearning I have is that our lives become straight
and simple. We should conduct our affairs with calmness and grace,
without a trace of showiness but full of benevolence, our wants
should be few; our ideals high; our efforts selfless; and the need of
our country should take precedence over our own need.


Beginning with absolute sympathy with the Swadeshi Movement, becoming
one of its leaders and being actively engaged with the socio-economic life of
Bengal, by 1907, Tagore was disillusioned with the movement as it soon
degenerated into violence. Tagore had lost his faith in narrow patriotism and
consequently quit the Swadeshi Movement. In a letter written on November 19, 1908, to Aurobindo Mohan Bose, a student of Calcutta University and his follower, Tagore shows his resentment:

Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live.

(Tagore 2005: No.36:72).

The letter becomes a record of a political and personal philosophy and a way to voice his views on the nation.

Gandhi tried to apply the principles of self discipline and restraint onto himself and his family before experimenting with them in the larger context of the nation. The private and personal experiences were used as examples and occasions to discuss the teleology of the nation. In his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth*, he makes the most private human acts – participation in sex and consumption of food – into areas of public discourse. The personal letters written to his sons and relatives show how he was critiquing the notions of modernity and conceiving his own ideas in the making of the nation. Before implementing his ideas in an alternative political practice, he propagated these ideas in personal communications.

In his private letters written to his sons and nephew, Gandhi refers to some of the values which he felt were important in re-inventing the nation. In an attempt to create what appears to be an alternative modernity, Gandhi projected an inward spirituality through his belief in asceticism and brahmacharya. He says in a letter to his son Maganlal Gandi that despite his bitter experiences in India, he believed that there was little to learn from the west (Gandhi 1965: Vol. 14: 5040). He says that
the difference between the west and the east establishes itself in the fact that the west believed in self-indulgence while the east had faith in self-control.

This same tone is evident in a letter to his wife, Kasturba, where Gandhi advises her to cultivate the qualities of universal love. He tells her to compensate for the absence of her children by showering her love and affection on the other children. He believed that the benevolence of human love was important for the development of the nation:

If you look upon all the children there as your own, quite soon you will cease to feel the absence of the latter...as you come to love others and serve them, you will have a joy welling up from within You should make it a point to visit early in the morning all those who may be sick and nurse them, special food should be prepared or kept apart for anyone who needs such food. You should visit the Maharashtrian ladies and amuse their children or take them away for a walk. You should make them feel that they are no strangers. Their health should improve.


In his letter written to Harilal Gandhi from Phoenix in September 5, 1912, he refers to the importance of learning Sanskrit: “The knowledge of Sanskrit opens the door to all the Indian languages” (Gandhi 1916: Vol. 12:31). In what is evidently a social-reform project, he writes against the divisions created by the caste system and expresses a belief in accommodating all in a composite culture. This appears in a letter addressed to Manilal Gandhi from Pretoria Prison in Transvaal on the occasion of his taking up the sacred thread “As it is, we have too much of the false divisions between shudras and others. The sacred thread is therefore today rather a hindrance than a help” (Gandhi 1916: Vol.12: 206). His ideas on “Swaraj”, which he perceived as central to the formation of the nation are elaborately explained in these
letters addressed to his son Maganlal Gandhi written on 1910, "It is not enough merely to profess orally to have the above sentiment; it should stand the test when the occasion comes" (Gandhi 1909 Vol. 10:205).

There is nothing of the personal here; only a public voice shaping itself. Thus, the letter form helped in propagating the ideas he thought were important to assert the identity of the nation. The study of the autobiographical form in the letters of Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru, show the different ways in which these writers constructed the fields of meaning for the independence of the country and its future. The autobiographical form of the letter is embodied in an authoritative "I" who recounts events and impressions to an addressee. Even in the personal letters addressed to friends and members of the family, these writers define different ideological perceptions in the making of the nation, which they try to explain and formulate by drawing upon their personal lives. The personal experiences of men cannot be separated from the narrative of the nation as is evident in their letters.

II

The primary definition of a woman's selfhood is with what has always been her private identity. Women's autobiographical writings reveal these aspects of a woman's life and tell her complete story, thus creating new and different elements of her self. Linda Anderson explains that this does not mean returning to the same (masculine) subjectivity which saw itself as unitary and complete, but suggests an expansion to include other forms of subjectivities (Anderson 2001:102). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have argued that the marginalized subject, by "deploying autobiographical practices that go against the grain" constitute an "I" (Watson and Smith 1992: xix). This "I" which is different from the singular "I" of the masculine
discourse can operate as an alternative where the subject is constituted by gender. Julia Swindell states that:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness — women, black people, and working class people have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a 'personal' voice, which speaks beyond itself.


Autobiography therefore has the potential to voice the experiences of the marginalized. According to Annette Kolodny, “the fine distinction between public and private, or trivial and unimportant, which served as a guide to male autobiographers have never really been available to women” (Anderson 2001: 34). Women’s autobiographical writings can be viewed as a reflection of women’s different experiences both public and private.

Women’s autobiographical writings serve as means through which they created images of the “self”. The act of writing becomes a way by which she can find a “voice” for her self that is not recognized in the public male discourse. Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu found in the autobiographical form of the letter a voice to articulate their selves.

In the letters to Mary Martin, Toru Dutt overcomes her feeling of loneliness and re-discovers her self. In sharing her loneliness with her friend, she is able to reassess her situation and find new ways of looking at the world. The act of sharing makes her re-analyze and re-discover herself. Toru Dutt compensates for her loneliness after her return from England by writing to Mary Martin, whom she had met at Cambridge in England, in 1871, during her four year travel in Europe. After
the death of her sister Aru, Mary Martin became her constant confidant as she looked to her friend for emotional and intellectual support. In a letter addressed to Mary Martin after the death of Aru, Toru Dutt writes on September 19, 1874:

The Lord has taken dear Aru from us. It is a sore trial for us, but His will be done. We know He doeth all things for our good. She was very peaceful and happy to the last, though she suffered intensely from fever, dyspepsia, and great debility during her last illness. She lies beside my brother in our little cemetery beyond the bridge. 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.

The last line “think of us sometimes, dear”, shows how Dutt tries to share with Mary Martin her personal loss of Aru’s death and also tries to draw support from her.

Toru Dutt’s correspondence with Mary Martin helped her to work her way out of her loneliness and redefine the contours of her world. After the four year travel in England, the enclosed life that she had to live in her Manicktollah house in Calcutta and her Baugmaree garden house, situated in the suburbs of Calcutta, began to suffocate her. Aru’s death, after the family’s return to India, further heightened her loneliness. In a letter written to Mary Martin on March 24, 1876 from Manicktollah Street, Calcutta she reveals:

We do not go much into society now. The Bengali reunions are always for men. Wives and daughters and all women-kind are confined in the house, under lock and key. I have not been to any dinner party or any party at all since we left Europe. And then I do not know any people here except those of our kith and kin, and some of them I do not know.

(141 Emphasis added).
In another letter written on October 31, 1876 from Calcutta she writes:

We do not visit any people about the neighbourhood, except uncle Girish, and we cannot take any walks about, for no lady goes out except in a carriage or a palanquin. It is considered infra dig., to walk in the street on foot (233).

This is as much a picture of woman's position in elite Bengal society as it is of her loneliness. Being able to find an outlet for her feelings also allowed her to discover new ways of looking at the world and herself, and explore these through the medium of art. Although the physical world where Toru Dutt lived restricted her movements, yet the communication through letters allowed her to re-perceive her relationship with the world. This gives a new subjectivity to her self as she learns to re-analyze her situation in the manner suggested by Satya P Mohanty (2001). Thus, when Toru Dutt reads the life of the Bronte sisters, she identifies her own loneliness with them and makes a general statement of women's frustrations. She echoes the lines from Elizabeth Barrett Browning at the beginning of Charlotte Bronte's biography by Mrs Gaskell which she feels is appropriate in defining the experiences of women. In a letter which she wrote to her friend from Baugmaree Garden House on May 3, 1876, she refers to her feelings for the Bronte sisters after her reading of Charlotte Bronte's Life by Mrs. Gaskell. She writes:

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 world! (153).

This identification of her loneliness with the solitary life of the Bronte sisters and with the condition of women in general redefine her perception of the world.
In her letters, Toru Dutt also began to show herself as a translator and poet. The letters were the first step towards developing her literary self—it was in their private space where she fashioned her public image as a poet and a translator. Here she could write to Mary Martin about the pride she felt as an "authoress", although in actual life, the wish to hold an independent profession on her own terms went unrecognized. On April 24, 1876, the year when the first census was taken in India, she wrote: "The census of Calcutta was taken a few days ago; I asked Papa to put in my column 'Authoress', as a profession, with which request he did not comply!" (146).

This space was important for her as it allowed her freedom of expression and confidence in her self. It facilitated her entry into the public sphere where her proficiency as a poet and translator came to be recognized. It is through her correspondence that she gained confidence as a writer and was able to express herself in public.

Toru Dutt also experimented with translations in the letters. In a letter dated October 12, 1875, she copied out some of her latest translations of French poetry, which she translated from the French poet Eugene Manuel. In another letter written on November 8, 1875, she copied two of Heine's translations of French poetry and her own English translations of them. When she sent her English translations of French poetry to her friend along with their French originals, she sought support, criticism and approval. On Oct 12, 1875, she wrote: "Do you like it"? (102) or on Nov 8, 1875, "Which do you prefer?" (110).

As she got public recognition as a translator she wrote to her friend about her regular contributions of English translations from the French in the Bengal...
Magazine edited by Mr. Dey on January 11, 1875 (78). She shared with her friend the joy of recognition in public by sending her the reviews of her book, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* carried by newspapers and magazines. The sense of being recognized in public was an unfamiliar experience for women as it meant crossing the domestic sphere, a rare phenomenon for women in the mid-nineteenth century. This experience brought an unprecedented joy expressed in the reports of the ovations she sent to her friend. These reports are presented in detail in the reviews, which she copied for her friend, Mary Martin from various magazines and newspapers. She gave detailed reports of reviews published in *The Englishman, The Friend of India, The Indian Charivari* and *The Bengalee*, to Mary Martin. One such review from *The Bengalee*, and sent to Mary Martin from Manicktollah Street on July 1876, reads thus:

Some Bengali ladies have taken themselves to the field of literature, and written poems and dramas of considerable merit in their native tongue. But Miss Toru Dutt has not only surpassed them all but has shown a culture very rare even amongst our best educated men. The ‘Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields’ which she has presented to us in an octavo volume of 234 pages, containing poetical pieces mostly translated from modern French writers. The extensive knowledge she displays, and the comments she shows over the English tongue, appear to us simply marvelous when we learn that the accomplished authoress is yet in her teens (177).

Sharing the recognition she received with her friend gives her a feeling of confidence. Besides, Toru Dutt also found in the letters a space to discuss her reading experiences. Her father Govin Chunder Dutt, was a shareholder of the Calcutta Public Library, as she wrote on September 21, 1874 that she had access to a variety of books (68). On April 23, 1875, she writes that books were also delivered
to the Dutt family from several companies like Messrs Hachette and Co. through orders sent by mail (85). The experience of reading each book, accompanied by discussions – quotations and comments, is communicated to Mary Martin. Sharing her reading experiences with her friend also facilitated her literary interests and encouraged her in her further reading. The privacy of the letter form enable her to interpret the books with remarkable directness and ease. The letters also have comments on a large number of French and English books which she regularly shared with her friend. Denied access to the public sphere, the books were the only source of knowledge and introduced her to the outside world. Exchanging her reading experiences with her friend helped expand her knowledge and fed her reflection.

She comments on the French journal “Les Reuvx deux Mondes” thus:

I go on reading from Les Reuvx deux Mondes: they afford to me a vast field of amusement and instruction, and the subjects in each number are so varied: political questions, social questions, geological, literary, theatrical and all subjects of interest are discussed and set forth clearly before the reader (234).

In a letter written on October 2, 1876, Toru Dutt tells Mary Martin of the reading experience of Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables* and gives an analysis of the book and its author:

Hugo, you know, is a rank democrat; he has his own opinions about human justice, and the book is mainly written to show the baseness of society and the injustice done by human laws (215).
In a letter dated March 13, 1876, she quotes and comments on some of the poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (133-134). Her reading of these poems enriched and facilitated her literary experiences.

The letters become the site for sharing many of her linguistic experiences while studying Sanskrit. The varied experience of learning the “difficult language” is conveyed to her friend. In a letter dated November 23, 1875, Toru Dutt tells her friend about her study of Sanskrit (111), and keeps her informed about her progress in learning the language. Her knowledge of Sanskrit facilitated her reading of the ancient texts and she reveals to her friend her experiences of reading Sakuntala in Sanskrit (190). She also refers to her reading of Valmiki’s Ramayana and in her letter written on March 24, 1876, she translates to her friend two lines from the epic which she includes in the notes in A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields. With a view to make her friend aware of the new language she was learning, she invites her friend to try and pronounce the words in Sanskrit as she says:

would you like to pronounce the words in Sanskrit?
Thistai, loko bina shurjong, shoshong ba
Might live the world withoutsun, corn or
Shoilong bina,
Water without,
Nau tu Ramong bina dahay thistaytu momo
No but Ram without (in) body shall live my Jibitom.
Life (141).

She urges her friend to learn about Sanskrit literature through the English translations she recommends to her. In this process she also involves her in her own interests. She tells her to read William Jones’s translation of the Sakuntala, Clarissa Bader’s La Femme dans l’Inde Atique, and Frederika Richardson’s The Iliad of the
East. She hopes to whet her friend’s interest in the women of ancient Indian legends as she talks with pride of the sacrifice of her country’s “heroines” Sita, Damayanti, Savitri and Gandhari (144). These cultural exchanges motivate her to translate Clarissa Bader’s *La Femme dans l’Inde Atique* or *Women of Ancient India* into English. Toru Dutt’s love for the Indian legends, is seen not as imitation of the Orientalists as Meenaksi Mukherjee says, it as not “a facile submission to the orientalist agenda”. It was the consequence of listening to her mother’s stories from the ancient legends narrated to her in childhood. The stories, which were orally narrated to her by her mother, became part of the literary and cultural tradition of which she felt herself to be an inextricable part. She reveals through the letters the impact that her mother’s retelling of stories had on her as a child – an effect which she also conveys to Clarissa Bader. In the letter written to Bader on March 8, 1877, just before her death, wherein she thanks Bader for giving her the permission to translate her book *La Femme dans l’Inde Atique*, she writes:

I am very proud to be able to say that the heroines of our grand epics are worthy of all honour and love. Is there any heroine more touching, more lovable than Sita? I do not believe so. When I hear my mother, in the evening, sing the old lays of our country, I almost always cry. The laments of Sita, when banished for the second time as she wanders alone in the vast forests, despair and terror in her soul, is so moving that I believe there is no one who could hear it without shedding tears.

(Lokuge.346).

Toru Dutt’s knowledge of Indian tradition is an aspect of personality that she reclaimed not merely as stereotype or model for women – but as a literary-cultural corpus which women had as much claim to as men.
Another subject that interested her was the natural environment at “Baugmaree” which finds an important focus in her letters. The garden house at Baugmaree becomes a restorative and regenerative place that offered her a sanctuary of her own where she could do anything she liked, “without fear of any peering and scandalized neighbour, staring in surprise and contempt at her strange, man like ways” (233). Here she spent many happy hours gazing out at the peaceful and serene scene within the “vareigated foliage”. The letters give expression to her periods of contemplation and express her taste for solitude. The quiet moonlit nights in Baugmaree bring feeling of peace and serenity which stirs her to poetic expression. As she writes to Mary Martin on May 3, 1876:

The night was clear, the moon resplendent; one or two stars glimmering here and there; before us stretched the long avenue bordered with high casuarinas very like the poplars in England; around us the thick mango groves: the tall bettelnut trees, the coconut palms, with their proud waving plumes of green foliage, and all wrapt in a sweet and calm silence (154).

The act of writing a letter where she could try out both her appreciation of the scene and her process of expression is the first stage of her writing poems like “Our Casuarina Tree” and “Baugmaree”. It is the source of her interest in painting as she gives a detailed description of the scenes. She writes to her friend on May 13, 1876, of the various colours of the landscape, with all its distinctive shades, from her garden house at Baugmaree:

I wish you could see our date palms. They are so beautiful now. The dates of a rich orange colour, hanging in immense clusters among the leaves, stand in striking contrast to the green plume like leaves. If a painter were here, a ‘landscape painter’, that is he would revel in this world of variegated foliage. There are so many shades of green: from the light, yellowish and
bright one of the tamarind tree, the dark blue, somber green tint of the mango or the dusty brownish green of the sky reaching casuarinas (156).

Against the nationalist discourse which associated the land with the motherland, Toru Dutt sees the colours of the landscape at Baugmareae as if for their own sake appreciating them for what they are, and not what they stand for. She looks at it with an artistic appreciation and awareness that the materials of the garden would serve a landscape painter. She distinguishes the subtle shades of different colours as a landscape painter would – from the rich orange colour of the date palm to the green colour of the leaves. She distinguishes the light, yellowish and bright shade of the tamarind tree from the dark blue, somber green tint of the mango or the dusty brownish green of the sky reaching Casuarinas. She is absorbed in the moment, with no sense of putting to symbolic use, the details of the scene as she writes on May 3, 1876:

The night was clear, the moon resplendent; one or two stars glimmering here and there; before us stretched the long avenue bordered with high casuarinas very like the poplars in England; around us the thick mango groves: the tall bettelnut trees, the coconut palms, with their proud waving plumes of green foliage, and all wrapped in a sweet and calm silence (154).

This is an important distinction in male and female writers of this time – those with a nationalist agenda evolving the metaphor of the land as mother, while Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu both show a tendency to leave the natural in its place, letting it to be itself. In Dutt’s case the desire to familiarize a close friend with the things that she herself loves so much, becomes the occasion to describe these scenes in minute details – the letter form itself calling forth this unconsciously moral view of that which is other.
The usefulness of the personal exchange through the letter form is also interestingly evident in Rabindranath Tagore’s letter to his English friend. Tagore describes the richness of the landscape of Santiniketan drawing a contrast of it with the English landscape in autumn and spring. He writes to Rothenstein from Santiniketan on Oct 20, 1913:

It has already become difficult for me to bring before my mind your October landscape dim with mist and numb with creeping cold. As I sit writing all the doors of my room are wide open and the stainless golden light of this late autumn is pouring in from all sides flooding my brain with its quivering stream of radiance. The glistening green of the heavy foliage of the tall ‘shal’ trees soaring in the clear blue sky seems to me like an outburst of music from the heart of the earth. I can assure you that this is the most beautiful spot of land that I can ever hope to find anywhere.

(Tagore 71:129).

To Tagore, the tall “shal trees” soaring in the clear blue sky creates an “outburst of music from the hearth of the earth”. The “stainless golden light of the autumn pouring in from all sides” and “floodling” his brain “with its quivering stream of radiance” shows how the environment at Santiniketan fed his poetic sensibility. Thus, the addressee becomes only a plea for expressing the growth of his poetic sensibility in Santiniketan. In Toru Dutt, there is the urge to communicate the aesthetic beauty of landscape at Baugmaree. Thus, as against man’s letters, it is the exchange which is more important in women’s letters. In this letter addressed to her friend on April 25, 1875, she sends to her friend a description of the early morning at Baugmaree:

The mornings are so pleasant in the garden: very early, at about three in the morning, the Bheem-raj, a little bird, begins his song; half an hour
afterwards, all the bushes and trees burst into melody, the kokila, the 'Bow-Kotha-kow – which means, ‘Speak, o bride’ – the Papia&c. And the gay little hummingbirds, with their brilliant colours, dive into the flowers for honey with busy twitters (86).

Toru Dutt is able to develop and explore her own interests through the regular exchanges. In the process, her different hobbies as keeping pet animals, her keen interest in the local birds and animals and her love for reading find space for development and further exploration. These exchanges add different facets to her self. Many of the letters reflect her interest in plant and animal life. She gives accurate information about the seasonal fruits in her garden:

Oranges are in full season now; they are beautiful, we cannot get the like of them anywhere in England; they are as large as any of the English or Maltese oranges and the skin peels off like that of the Mandarin ones, and they are as beautiful as honey. Then we have now in season the Batavian oranges: our Garden is full of them; they are quite yellow outside and red inside, they are as big as a large water melon, and look very pretty amongst the dark green leaves (75).

In a letter written on May 3, 1876, she writes about the mangoes and lichees in the garden:

Mangoes are coming now, but those of our garden are not fully ripe yet. Lichees are still in season, but they will soon disappear, as the strawberries in England, very short lived (151).

These cultural exchanges build up a discourse on the Indian flora and fauna, although Toru Dutt explores it from the limited space of her garden. This develops Dutt’s feeling of identification with the Indian environment. She describes to her
friend the distinctiveness of the Indian flora in the same letter written on May 3, 1876:

I wish I could send you one of these Champa flowers which are on the table in a glass of water. They are of a pale yellow colour, with six petals three outside and three inside, and they have a beautiful strong fragrance which fills the whole room. The glass of water also contains one Gunda-raj (literally, king of fragrance). It fully justifies its name; its odour is a little fainter than that of the Champa, but very sweet. It is a snow white flower. I wish you could see our Indian flora (151).

The Indian poets emulated William Jones's method of writing notes to make their poetry authentic (Chaudhuri 2002:7). However, Dutt's descriptions of the Indian flora and fauna do not categorize her as an orientalist; they are not the outcome of her scholarly explorations but are deeply associated with her own experiences. Her own familiarity with the Indian environment as she sees it from her garden house at Baugmaree is what is seen in the letters to Mary Martin. Here she talks of the local flowers – the Champa and the Gundaraj as she views them from her own garden. Similarly, in the same letter, she refers to the banyan tree and the first basket of jumrools from her garden and goes on to describe them, “They are a boon this hot weather and are of a whitish colour, with just a shade of very pale green, very luscious, large as a nectarine and a great thirst-quencher” (152).

As part of the desire to bring the scene vividly before her friend, Dutt writes about various incidents in her garden. Left alone after the death of Aru, the garden space became a refuge and a place of recovery from grief where she could explore various interests. Having a special interest in animals, she reveals to her friend interesting incidents about the animals in the garden. Thus, besides the cultural exchange of the local flora and fauna, there are references to the behavioural
characteristics of some of the animals in the garden. In her first letter addressed to Mary Martin on December 19, 1873, she writes about the behaviour of the monkeys in the garden:

We see plenty of wild monkeys; it is very pretty to see the young ones play with each other; their mothers are very fond of them, and embrace them as affectionately as any human mother! Some of the males are very big, almost as tall as papa, my papa I mean, not the young monkey’s papa; these large ones are rather dangerous; but they will all run away at the very sight of a gun. We never shoot them for they all stanch their wounds with their hands and act like a human being, and it seems as though you had shot a man (57).

She refers to another incident of a goose being killed by a snake in her garden (64). Many incidents about snakes recur in her letters. In a letter written to Mary Martin on November 8, 1875, she refers to a snake charmer who visited her garden:

Several days ago, a snake charmer came here to show off his serpents; there were three cobras, two pythons and three two headed snakes and several smaller ones, also ten or twelve mountain scorpions. Of course all the serpents had their poisonous fangs broken; the men are obliged to break them at least twice a month; it must be dreadful work. One of the cobra’s bit the man’s finger so as to bring forth a few drops of blood, but of course it did the man no harm, as the poison tooth was broken. There is a root called in Latin, Aristolochia Indica, which has a marked effect on the most poisonous snakes; the man held this to the serpents and it was marvellous how it cowed them at once: they tried to sidle away as soon as they smelt it. But I doubt very much it would have any effect when a cobra is wild and free and attacks one; it is then blind with rage and no earthly power will turn it from its victim (104-105).

In this a discourse on snakes and snake charmers, she is consciously revealing the exotic east to her friend. Yet, the intersubjective relationship makes her share the
little incident in the garden rather than merely display the exotic east. The friendly correspondence concretizes her interests in animals and she goes on to refer to various other incidents, commenting on them and exploring them. Toru Dutt's two horses Jeunette and Gentille also provided her considerable opportunities to engage herself in the human-animal relationship. She shares her experience of feeding them and looking after them to Mary Martin. She refers to an incident on June 26, 1876, when one of her neighbour's horses suffered from heat apoplexy (169). Having read many books on horses, she goes on to find the reasons behind its sudden illness. She finds the intense heat and exhaustion as the reason behind the horse's sudden fit of the disease as it was taken for exercise in the hot afternoon and directly taken to the stable.

It is important to note here, the kind of personality that developed from the reflection and revelation of the self to a sympathetic recipient. It is not surprising therefore that Dutt's responses to the dominant ideological climate of the time was different from that of the nationalists who perhaps always saw the big picture. The limitations set on her mobility, her access to the outside world only through other people, and this intimate relationship with a private contemporary who happened to be a British, helped develop in her a unique perspective on her time. She was aware of the daily practices of hatred and injustice being meted out to her countrymen by the colonial administration through magazines and newspapers. But even as she focuses on tales of abuses which were daily heaped on the Indians by the British administration, the letters do not project her antipathy against the British. Rather it is the feeling of sympathy which becomes prominent through her communication. Considering the number of instances where she expresses her sympathy for her
countrymen in these letters, it is her feminine voice, identified in "the voice of care," (Gilligan 1997:582) which becomes significant. Commenting on a newspaper report of a European pushing a Bengali gentleman, she writes on March 24, 1876, "You see how my countrymen are treated by Anglo Indian sahibs" (139). She apparently makes a clear distinction here between the British at home and the British in India.

The dynamics of colonial dominance against the subject people are projected in Dutt's letters with a view to share with her friend the tales of colonial oppression. On the basis of the police reports in the newspapers she affirms the perversion of justice by the British government. In another instance, she critiques the colonial law even in dealing with juvenile 'natives' for very meager faults. The sympathy and support from her friend encouraged her to narrate several authentic tales of colonial oppression in her letters. Referring to one such incident in a letter from Manicktollah Street, Calcutta written on August 7, 1876, she comments, "You see how cheap the life of an Indian is in the hands of an English judge" (191).

She writes about the racial discrimination of the English towards the Indians and expresses her sympathy for the people of her own country who were debarred from their rightful dues. On June 6, 1875 she writes that in the list of successful candidates who appeared in the civil service examination there was not a single Indian. She is sympathetic towards the Bengalis in their failure:

It is harder when a Bengali fails than when an Englishman has the same mishap; the Bengali leaves all his friends and relations and stakes all his fortune for a successful examination, the expenses of going and coming are so great (90).
In a letter written to her friend on June 26, 1876, she nostalgically refers to the events of 1857 which were being narrated to her by her father. She quotes the words of a Sikh porter who used to say sadly:

‘Ah! the English have mismanaged the whole affair! If they explained and smoothed away the matter, all would have been well. But now – they all gone’ (meaning the Indian troops), ‘all gone! The best, the bravest, the strongest!’ (170).

Toru Dutt’s correspondence with Mary Martin also made her aware of the status of women’s education. She becomes conscious of the developments that were taking place in the sphere of women’s education in her time. Referring to a report on the Indian Mirror, edited by Keshab Chandra Sen, of two Indian girls who had passed the Entrance examination she writes to her friend on February 12, 1877:

We are in fair way of having our Merton Hall you see, are we not? I do hope Indian girls will be in the future better educated and obtain more freedom and liberty than they now enjoy (264).

Here she talks of freedom once again and believes that women’s education would be able to provide women with freedom and liberty. As her letters reveal, Toru Dutt seems to have used them as an opportunity to develop and fill out various aspects of her self. The privacy of the exchange allowed her to discuss the minutiae of life in a time when the concerns of the fellow Indians were on a much grander scale.

III

In her essay “Me and My Shadows”, Jane Tompkins represents her writing self as split between two voices, the public and the private; the former that of an academic critic who knows how to use critical terminology and the latter that of a
person who wants “to write about her feelings” (Tompkins 1997:1104). Tompkins explains that there was no room for the expression of the “personal self” in academic circles as “the person” was looked down upon with disdain in these circles. Unable to express her personal self, her voice “wobbles” and “vacillates back and forth” (Tompkins 1997:1107). She explains that woman’s personal experiences which were rooted in her feminine self went unrecognized in academic circles as she writes:

The disdain for popular psychology and for words like “love” and “giving” is part of the police action that academic intellectuals wage ceaselessly against feeling, against women, against what is personal. The ridiculing of the touchy feeling of the “Micky Mouse”, of the sentimental (often associated with reaching that takes students’ concerns into account) belong to the tradition Allison Jaggar rightly characterizes as founding knowledge in the denial of emotion. It is looking down on women, with whom feelings are associated, and on the activities with which women are identified; mother, nurse, teacher, social worker, volunteer.

(Tompkins 1997:1115).

Tompkins maintains that she had to hide a part of her self in expressing her public voice. She affirms that the criticism which she desired to write would always take off from her personal experience and would always be in some way “a chronicle of her hours and days” (Tompkins 1997:1107). Asserting the significance of the personal voice for women, I will try to show how Sarojini Naidu found in the letters a means to express her personal self even as she pursued an extremely public-political career. The space of the letters was important as the expression of her personal experiences offered Sarojini Naidu a sense of release from her suffocating public life. Naidu’s letters record her feelings which read like, “a chronicle of her hours and days” in three different stages of her life. This gives
expression to different aspects of her self. Her letters can be divided into three stages involving three different phases of her life.

The subject/object and mind/body split has been referred to in the masculine discourse as homologous to the male/female opposition where irrationality and thoughtlessness is equated with femininity (Flax 1989:189). Feminists have refused to accept this male vision of the subject/object division and have instead proposed a co-mingling of the two or an empathetic feeling for the object, where the object is no longer reified but respected in its integrity. Such empathy for the object can be achieved with the sense of feeling. Nancy Chodorow says that feelings give the self a sense of agency and authenticity as one is able to affect others and one's environment (Chodorow 1997:8). She has shown that women's virtues like 'nurturance' are uniquely feminine and usually thought to emerge from women's biology which is intrinsically connected to a women's particular social role (Chodorow 1997:8). Sarojini Naidu's letters addressed to her daughters Leilamani and Padmaja Naidu shows the uniqueness of a woman's maternal feelings. Even in the midst of an active public life, Naidu finds in the letters, a way to express her self first as mother and increasingly as sister and friend. The centrality of feelings and love in Sarojni Naidu's letters reflect another self, that exists alongside her political identity.

The letters of the first stage were addressed to her lover and future husband Govindarajulu Naidu whom she addresses as a young girl while studying in England. They were outlets for expressing her love and the manner in which a woman's feelings and desires are expressed in these letters suggest a style akin to Helene Cixous's "écriture feminine". The letters of the second phase that express
her poetic experiences are addressed to her mentors Edmund Gosse, Arthur Symons and her publisher William Heinemann from Hyderabad. The letters of the third phase mark her entry into public life and record her national experiences. Besides being addressed to national figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and focusing on the public aspect of her life, a major part of her letters in this phase are addressed to her daughters Leilamani and Padmaja Naidu and reveal her maternal feelings in the midst of her busy public life.

The suppression of a youthful love is given an affirmation in her love letters written to Govindrajulu Naidu. As stated by her biographer, Sarojini Chattopadhyaya fell in love with Dr. Naidu after her matriculation examination. The young Sarojini was sent to England by her father, Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya to prevent an intercaste marriage (or an early marriage as claimed by her biographer). Her father believed that “the romance of a new country would surely make her forget her love for a young doctor” (Sengupta 1966: 28).

However, her love for him did not wane during her three year stay in England. The feeling of love, sought to be forcibly suppressed by her father, by sending her to England, finds expression with rapturous intensity in these letters. Sarojini Naidu’s love letters addressed to Govindrajulu Naidu are an expression of her unconscious drives which shows itself in an ecriture feminine language. Referring to the ambiguous relation of subject and object in a writing practice controlled by unconscious drives, Cixous claims that “ecriture feminine” is only a practice, as it cannot be defined in a theory. She writes:

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing…. For this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. (Cixous 2000: 264).
Naidu's letters to Govindarajulu Naidu are an assertion of her unconscious desires where she writes with a force which destroys all social restraints. Cixous writes in the “Laugh of the Medusa”:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve – discourse.... (2000:267).

Naidu’s letters from England to her love break all the barriers of ‘regulation and codes’ to give free expression to her desires. In an upsurge of emotion for her lover, Naidu subverts all regulations of “linearity” and “order”. In a letter dated May 17, 1896, Sarojini Naidu is rapturous:

O my darling, there is such a yearning in my heart tonight, to see you, to hear your voice, my love, my love. I love you. O I love you! all my soul rushes to you over the seas, over the lands – O darling, O darling! When shall we be together again – I feel I cannot settle because I want you, want you yes from your dear eyes to your dear feet (9).

Naidu’s uncontrollable emotion refuses to be controlled by the male norms of language. The repetition of the same lines show her inability to express her love in the traditional structures of language.

In the same letter, Sarojini Naidu expresses her erotic impulses with considerable boldness:

Only my lover ought to be here, my own lover. We could have kissed on the balcony of roses in twilight, and you could have stroked my hair and kissed my cheek furatively while I wrote my verses (16-17).

The aggressiveness of her desires is a deliberate subversion of traditional feminine codes of modesty. The expression of erotic desire in the letter also
encourage her to express them in poetry. Thus, it gives an affirmation to her poetic self. This is even more explicit in a letter addressed to Govindarajulu Naidu on June 3, 1896 from London, when she describes one of her ecstatic moments of inspiration:

Last night, Govindu, I threw open my window and leant out into the divine darkness - and such a passionate yearning shook my frame. Such a wild, thrilling anguish of ecstasy. I could scarcely contain myself - and a few passionate lines came to me - the colouring of which is perhaps too warm - but I cannot alter it - it is so real. Tell me if you approve of it, my darling. [“O passionate Night aflame with lover’s desire...”] (20).

Female sexuality becomes a positive force which incites her creativity. It defies the masculine parameters which see it as a ‘lack’, as it becomes the source of Naidu’s poetry.

Again in this letter, she says:

I could lay my head on your breast and shut my eyes, and the soothing caress of your voice and touch would charm my weary brain to be calm and I should rest ...but you are not here (19).

The description of the sensations evoked by touch assumes importance in revelation of her sexual desires. It gives an expression to female sexuality and its emphasis on the tenderness.

The letters to Govindarajulu Naidu also record her new experiences in London. The sheer pleasure in the new surroundings and a record of her daily experiences are directly communicated to him. The delight in the trivial things of life -- having a cup of tea, meeting people, her way of dressing or going to a party are expressed with an anticipation of his interest and concern. The freedom that she
enjoys in her new social setting with her new acquaintances infuses her with new aspirations consequently facilitating the growth of her self. Virginia Woolf comments that both in life and art the values of women are not the values of a man. Thus, when a woman writes, “she makes serious what appears insignificant to a man and trivial what is to him important” (Woolf 1979:49). Thus for Woolf women’s writing is radically distinct from a man’s because it is related to her female experience. Woolf believed that women’s writing differed from men not only in its content but also in its form. She stated in *A Room of One’s Own* that the ‘male’ sentence was “unsuited for a woman’s use”. Referring to the ‘male’ sentence used by some of the great writers like Lamb, Browne, Thackeray, Newman, Sterne, Dickens, De Quincey, she states in *A Room of One’s Own*, that “the weight, the pace, the stride of a man’s mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully” (Woolf 1945:76).

The language in Naidu’s letters are marked by ease, lightness and gentleness which makes it different from men’s writings. In a letter addressed to Govindarajulu Naidu on April 24, 1895 she writes of what she had seen and how she felt in a new place:

I saw a great deal today – the whole of London I thought – Trafalgar Square, Regent Street, Tower Bridge, Cleopatra Needle, and I don’t know what not …but yet I want you so much.’ (1).

In the letter to Govindarajulu Naidu, she also records her experiences of one Sunday:

I did not have a lonely Sunday. Lunched with Mrs. Hannock, where her sister Mathilde Blind was too. Then on to the Gosse’s for the afternoon. Mrs. Gosse was ill in bed – but Mr. Gosse was so delightful and kind and
Mrs. Hector was there. Such a wonderful vigorous and genial old lady – do you know her books? She’s a very popular writer and deservingly so. Miss Thomas was there too. I met a more interesting man, a scotch man there and had nice talk with him. Then, a hop, step and a jump and I was at Miss Mannings and had tea with her, and good advice and then drove home to a solitary evening (1-2).

Here there is an ease and lightness in the language. For a male writer these little events would have been seen as ‘trivial’, but for a woman these experiences are inextricably related with her female self. The easy mobility in moving from place to place signified in, “a hop, step or a jump” shows how these experiences of freedom and mobility were far from being “trivial”. For a woman such mobility was a special experience of freedom.

For instance in this letter addressed to Govindarajulu Naidu on January 15, 1896, she simply talks about how she spent an usual day:

Sweetheart I have come to sit me down at your feet and with my head on your knees to tell you how I have spent my day.... In the morning, I gave a general cleaning-up to my boxes and drawers, and O! A pretty piece of work it was to divide my papers from my clothes! And such a pile of letters did I burn up, chiefly scribbling of mine. Then I had a long practice, and wrote some letters, and read Shelley. I had a lonely lunch as Alice was away at her Musical College – but could eat nothing but an apple. After lunch, the mood came over me, and I wrote a tiny poem. Miss Manning came to see me at tea time. Since dinner, I’ve been writing and reading alternately.... (5-6).

These “uneventful experiences” are not subjects that would find their way into men’s letters but they are important for a woman. In another letter addressed to Govindarajulu Naidu on January 24, 1896, she records the events of her “hours and days”:
I am very tired tonight – the clock has just struck nine – but I feel like going to bed. After breakfast I went to college this morning to the history lecture, from there to the Wigrams, where I took some of my sauce for Mrs. Wigram, from there to Manning’s to lunch – After lunch, Miss Manning and I read a little of Schiller’s exquisite ballads rendered into English by Lytton. Later I went for about quarter of an hour to an At Home, where I saw Lady Reay and then drove home, straight to a long music lesson. It was such a glorious lovely day – like spring (13).

These disjointed feelings form the “personal self” of a woman and that is different from the singular, unitary “I” of the masculine self.

The love poems which she wrote to Govindarajulu Naidu in the letters find new directions after coming into contact with the renowned poet and critic Edmund Gosse in London. Padmini Sengupta states in her biography that Sarojini Naidu’s meeting with Edmund Gosse was an “accident”, “it was one of her fellow students who had taken her to meet one of the leading literary figures of England” (28). He had asked the young Sarojini to allow him to see her verses, to which request she complied by giving him “a bundle of verses”. Gosse commented that her verses were western in feeling and imagination and founded on “reminiscences of Tennyson and Shelley”. He had further advised Sarojini Naidu “to set her poems firmly among the mountains, the gardens, the temple, to introduce to us the vivid populations of her own voluptuous and unfamiliar province” (29). Sarojini followed his advice and started writing poems with an exclusive Indian background. Later she published her three volumes of poetry – The Golden Threshold (1905), The Bird of Time (1912) and The Broken Wing (1917). In the letters, she shows the impact that Edward Gosse had on the development of her poetic career. Thus the other becomes important in shaping her literary form.
She states in a letter written to Edmund Gosse on October 6, 1896 that she had always loved poetry from her childhood and on one occasion while solving a dull problem in Algebra, three verses suddenly came to her mind (26). She recollects that it was from that day that she silently cherished the ambition of becoming a poet. Her sense of enthusiasm and confidence in the possibility of her achievement is conveyed in the same letter:

Poetry is the one thing I love so passionately, so intensely, so absolutely, that it is my very life of life and now you have told me that I am a poet – I am a poet. I keep repeating it to myself to try to realize it (27).

She describes the changes in her poetry after meeting Edmund Gosse for the first time and communicates how this experience was a landmark in the development of her poetic self.

While in Cambridge, Sarojini Naidu also came in touch with the renowned poet and critic, Arthur Symons, who was also to be her friend. He was impressed by Sarojini Naidu’s large black eyes, which were like “luminous lotus pools in her fragile sensitive face” (The Golden Threshold, 16). The poetry of Arthur Symons had a powerful influence on her poetic career. In a letter addressed to Arthur Symons on July 18, 1896, she records her feeling of admiration on reading Symons’s poems. She was fascinated by the passion and pathos of his poems and confides that she had felt in her “every little nerve” the strength and beauty of these poems.

Sarojini Naidu’s personal feelings at the limitations and restrictions, which she as a woman had to undergo, and the struggles and the counter struggles she had to face also find expression in her letters. For a woman crossing the boundaries of the domestic sphere or the “threshold” was a significant experience. It was
accompanied by hesitations, fears and doubts although the desire to come out of the
domestic space had always been there. Some of these moments of hesitation and the
enthusiasm thereafter become the content of these letters. Sarojini Naidu's entry
into the public sphere as a poet was marked by her presentation of her poem “Ode to
the Nizam” to the Nizam of Hyderabad. This extraordinary experience is described
in detail in a letter addressed to Edmund Gosse on December 24, 1903:

I should never dream, of course, “of going forth unveiled” in the midst of
five hundred belted courtiers to the Nizam’s court – it would be the scandal
of India. As if it is, I supposed, it is something quite novel in the annals of
Indian tradition for a woman to present a poem to a sovereign in full durbar.
It savours almost of the forbidden (41).

All these varied experiences and the recognition she received first in her own
province of Hyderabad and then at the national level gave her new confidence to
enter the national arena as a poet. This entry into the public arena as a poet made her
gain renewed confidence for publishing her poems. The desire for publication and
yet the fear of it also finds expression in her letter to Edmund Gosse on January 12,
1905:

Living in Hyderabad, the most self centred of all Indian principalities,
absolutely isolated from all living literary influences and a public, my
personal ambition for success, for fame has been growing less and less,
though of course my instinct, the passionate longing to produce Art is part
of myself and cannot be quelled (44).

It was the kind response which she received from the public in the annual
National Congress held in Bombay that made her take the final decision to publish
her works. As she writes to Edmund Gosse:
My public was waiting for me – no, not for me, so much as for a poet, a national poet....This insight and wholly undeserved tribute from the great Indian public – the living, thinking public outside my sleep bound little city of Hyderabad, finally decided me to say “Yes” to your suggestion (45).

Thus her letters mark her feelings in the progression of her poetic self from the personal to the national. The experience of leaving the domestic and participating in the public sphere was something eventful for her.

But Sarojini Naidu could not remain content with her poetic self for a long time. By the turn of the century she was beginning to feel the call of the nation and she writes to Edmund Gosse how the rise of nationalism subsumed everything else in its wake:

I wonder if you can realize how difficult it is for any one to keep “merely” to the “primrose path” of Art – in India. France they say is the land of movements, but modern India I think their “cradle and home and their brier”. There is a tacit understanding that all talents and enthusiasms should concentrate on some practical end for the immediate good of the nation (47).

There is a confidence in her voice at this point, which had been lacking in her when for the first time she crossed the domestic sphere to join the public arena as a poet. She writes to William Heinemann, her publisher, announcing her abandonment of a poetical career: “I doubt myself because to me what I write seems so trivial, so lacking in thought and magic in the expression of the emotion I feel with such intensity” (54).

She confides to William Heinemann that her poetry was unable to express the intensity of her emotions and a career in politics would provide her the opportunity to speak. As Cixous says, in speech, a woman “materializes what she is
thinking” as here “she lays her self bare” and “it is with her body that she vitally supports the logic of her speech” (Cixous 2000:263). Sarojini Naidu stopped writing poetry for a career in politics, as she thought that the act of speaking would offer her more space for expression.

Apart from the official letters which she addressed to Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi in the midst of a busy political career, Sarojini Naidu wrote some 1250 personal letters to her daughters, Padmaja Naidu (Bebe) and Leilamani Naidu (Papi). In the personal correspondence with her daughters, there is a feeling of affection and closeness. These letters read like a diary where she writes all of her public and private experiences, narrating to her daughters the events and experiences of her public life and in her tone of affection the maternal feelings are apparent. These letters from a mother to her daughters are unlike Jawaharlal Nehru’s letters from a father to a daughter. For Nehru, the letter form was a means to educate his daughter in world history. It is Nehru’s exploration of world history which forms the subject in all the letters. The personal form of the letter was a means to explore a more public world as he writes in his second letter from Naini Central Prison to his daughter on New Years day, 1931, “But I have decided to write for my own pleasure. They bring you very near to me, and I feel almost that I have had a talk with you” (Nehru 1982:5). This feeling of tenderness is very rare in his letters, however, in Naidu’s letters, it is the feeling and affection for her daughters which dominate. She is engaged in a friendly conversation with her daughters where the presence of her addressees is always felt.

Using a psychoanalytical approach to individual development – specifically, an object-relational approach, Nancy Chodorow argues that one’s sense of identity,
agency and authenticity arises as a result of internalizing early nurturing relationships. Chodorow points out that though children of both sexes are a part of a mother’s self, “a mother unconsciously and often consciously experiences her son as more of an “other” (Chodorow 1997:16). This results in “the male self a more fixed me-not me distinction”. She feels that the development of a son’s male identity based on the “me-not me distinction” separates him from the mother and denies a feminine identity (Chodorow 1997:16). The female self is less separate from the mother and does not subsequently reject her primary sense of oneness for the mother. This sense of identification with her daughters and vice versa results in Sarojini Naidu’s letters written to her daughters. By contrast, only a couple of letters were written to her sons, Jaisurya and Randheera. Her letters to her daughters are marked by a feeling of closeness which made her share her experiences with them. As she writes in a letter written to Leilamani Naidu on April 18, 1931, “You cannot realize or perhaps even understand and believe how close you are not to my heart but in my heart” (244).

Sarojini Naidu’s biographer states that Sarojini Naidu was sent to America as an Indian Ambassador during the years 1928-1929. She was sent by the Congress as Mahatma Gandhi’s representative to America and Canada to counter the effects of Katherine Mayo’s book *Mother India*, in the west (209-210). It was from America and Canada that Sarojini Naidu wrote a large number of letters to her daughters Leilamani and Padmaja Naidu. In these letters Naidu shares her experiences of her visit to the United States with her daughters. In a letter written from San Francisco on January 24, 1929, she writes to Leilamani, “I send you for your share half the beauty I see around me” (223). These letters present her experiences in the United
States with all the minute details. There is little of her public experiences as an ambassador in these letters. In a letter written from Washington DC to Leilamani on January 5, 1929 she writes about her visit to an old friend, a Polish musician, Nadine Lysak, whom she had met after fourteen years (220). In another letter addressed to Leilamani from San Francisco on January 21, 1929, she gives a description of the train in which she was travelling. She writes:

I am writing from the glassed-in parlour at the rear of the car called the observation car ...In the front of the train is the men’s club car and barber’s shop. There are private drawing rooms for those who wish to pay for them.... (221).

She also goes on to describe a Chinese girl who runs about in the train in black trousers and seagreen coat doing “manicures and hairdressing” and rests at short intervals to do her own make up (221-222). Naidu also shares with her daughters her experience of speaking to a large audience. In a letter written from Montreal, Canada on April 7, 1929, she writes:

I spoke to about 1,600 people at the Women’s Club (with a sprinkling of distinguished men of art, science and letters as guests of honour). Tomorrow again I speak to about the same number at another luncheon meeting and the rest of the time is filled in with people and still more people, British and French Canadian, from Universities, from business, from banks, from church, hospital, law courts, social welfare centre — everywhere and how they all adore hearing me read my poems — and hear me speak (226).

She does not write about what she spoke but her experiences of speaking itself. The experience of speaking in public in an international gathering was an event for her and she communicates this rare experience to her daughters. In a letter written on
January 24, 1929, to Leilamani from a hotel in San Francisco just before appearing in public, she writes that the experience of sharing was important to her, “I want to share with you my joy in this wonderful city…” (222).

As against these letters written to her daughters expressing her personal self, the letters addressed to her sons are different. In her letter to her son Randheera (Min Man) addressed from Yervada prison on February 14, 1943 she writes about Gandhi’s deteriorating health after he goes on a fast unto death. Randheera, being a physicist, she reports to him about Gandhi’s condition. Thus this letter does not have anything where Sarojini Naidu shares her personal self. She writes to Randheera keeping in view his professional interest.

Sarojini Naidu had accompanied Mahatma Gandhi in his visit to London to attend the Second Round Table Conference (1931). In the midst of her public engagements she refers to her endless personal engagements, both public and private. In this letter addressed to both Padmaja and Leilamani on September 23, 1931, she writes not about the proceedings in the Round Table Conference but about her personal engagements like visiting Sylvia Pankhurst, and Gandhi’s meetings with Charlie Chaplin and Lady Hydari. She also refers to her meeting with the English novelist and dramatist John Galsworthy, Mrs. Stanley Baldwin, wife of the former British Prime minister and Rosita Forbes, English traveler and writer. In another letter written on November 25, 1931, while referring to some of the differences that offered between the Indian delegates and the British, she quickly shifts to her personal engagements, ranging from her weekly budget to her informal meetings and dinners with her friends.
Woman's role of nurture and care which were earlier seen as an impediment on her development have been seen by feminists like Carol Gilligan and Sarah Ruddick in a new light. Carol Gilligan notes the centrality of responsibility and care in women's moral domain (Gilligan 1997: 582). Sara Ruddick maintains that the practices of mothering shape and express maternal thinking. She sees in maternal thinking "a unity of reflection, judgement and emotion" (Ruddick 1997: 588). The values of mothering extend to other issues as well. As Ruddick shows, the values of maternal thinking are not confined in childbearing alone; they can be applied to public issues, as well. Sarojini Naidu's maternal feeling extends to other spheres as well. Ruddick sees the "instinct of preservation" as an important act which governs maternal practice (Ruddick 1997:590). In Naidu's letters her instinct of preservation shows itself in her public life.

Naidu uses her maternal instinct to help and sympathize with others. In her letter to Leilamani written on January 24, 1929 she writes of the large number of Sikh and Muslim farmers from the Punjab settled in California who came to greet her:

How many of them crossed 500 and 600 miles of the province to come to see my face when I reached San Francisco three days ago...not my face so much as in me the face of India the Mother!(223).

This ability to make the shift from the public to the private is an important aspect in the letters. In a letter addressed to Leilamani from the prison at Yervada, on August 24,1930, Naidu (she was imprisoned after she took over the fight against Salt Laws following Gandhi's arrest) shows the care and concern for her daughters:

I think Bebe has enjoyed her visit especially as the beautiful lady Baig came down from Panchgani. I gave her a green sari that I dyed. It suits her. I hope
she reaches home safe in mind, limb — and luggage. It was so lovely and comforting to see you on the 6th. When you arrive drive straight here and leave the food and perhaps you’ll catch a glimpse of me in my dressing gown. Also leave your tiffin carrier to the retainers, full of refreshment later in the day, for your Panchgani journey....It is delightful to hear that you have gained 16 lbs. You can afford to gain 16 more and then be quite fit for the new life of adventure and achievement that is certain to beckon along a shining road of difficulties and enchantments. This break is a real godsend: you need it so terribly urgently, to eat and sleep and eat again and sleep again and play with cats and dogs and be at home ... for a little while (238).

In a letter written to Gandhi from Taj Mahal Hotel, Bombay, on November 9, 1929 she expresses her wishes that “the Congress comes to some satisfactory adjustments” and makes itself convenient to participate in the Round Table Conference. She writes to Gandhi thus:

I am of course writing to you on the assumption that all the circumstances carefully considered in the light of the debate in the parliament, you would still keep the door open in the hope of arriving at some satisfactory adjustment enabling the Congress to participate in the proposed Conference. I know that you have always the patience to attempt, to the last moment, all proper and reasonable methods of preliminary discussion, argument, consultation, persuasion before you finally abandon your task and close the door. The door in my opinion should not be hastily closed. The occasion and the implications are too important (232).

The letter also shows how she tried to bring Gandhi and Jinnah together for a political discussion in the presence of Lord Irwin. In a letter written to Jawaharlal Nehru on the occasion of his election to the Presidentship of the Indian National Congress at Lahore on September 29, 1929, she offered “understanding and affection”:

In whatever fashion it is possible for me to help you or serve you in your tremendous and almost terrible task, you have but to ask... if I can give no
more concrete help, I can at least give you full measures of understanding and affection... (230).

Sarojini Naidu's motherly feelings were extended towards other women as well. In a letter written to her daughters from Yervada Prison, Poona on May 2, 1932, she sympathetically refers to the heroism of Gujarati ladies who have come to endure long tenures of rigorous imprisonment:

It is rather pathetic and heroic and impressive to see these Gujrati ladies... most of them delicately nurtured, sheltered, enduring more or less long terms of rigorous imprisonment... the “rigorous” being nothing so far as the prescribed ‘tasks’ are concerned but rigorous so far as food, coarse clothing and bedding go... Some of them, too, are in acutely feminine phases and stages of life... going to have, on the verge of having, or having just little Gujrati babies (270).

Naidu also writes to her daughters about her concerns for Gandhi while he was undergoing his fast at Yervada. She was entrusted the responsibility of looking after the “little man” (Gandhi) when his health worsened after continuous fasting (289). She gives a detailed record of his health to her daughters from Yervada. For instance in this letter addressed to Padmaja Naidu, she writes about her responsibilities in prison and also tells her daughters not to be anxious on her account. Thus, the letters to her daughters reveal how she extended her feelings of maternal care to others.

Maternal thinking which Ruddick says arises out of the interest in preservation forms an important theme in Naidu's letters to Jinnah. In the midst of a series of personal correspondences, she advises her friend, Jinnah, to preserve the essential unity of the country. In the midst of a most intimate and personal letter
written to Jinnah from Bombay on January 6, 1916, she uses her motherly instinct of preservation in order to remind him of his duties to the country:

I can scarcely tell you how much I have missed you at every moment and in every mood: it seems as if some critical portions of me were cut away and the sense of loss is heavy and acute. But we have our own lives to live exactly as they were predestined for us. And I want to remind you of your promise to me to give your young life as a beautiful and precious gift to the country that needs and cries for just such splendid love offerings as the offerings of your fine manhood, your talent, your courage, your service, your sacrifice and life (108).

The autobiographical form of the letter therefore becomes a site for revealing or constructing new subjectivities for women. Naidu’s letters help in expressing her personal, poetic, national and motherly selves.

The next chapter will go on to discuss the form of fiction, where a woman reveals her subjectivity in the guise of a fictional character. Although the epistolary form offered women scope for private expressions, the consciousness of an addressee, often enabling also sometimes restricted the revelation of her female desires simply because of the potential tangibility. The social restrictions did not allow Toru Dutt to express her feelings of love. Probably in the case of Naidu, she did not feel this discomfort, as her addressee was none other than her future husband. Fiction offered Toru Dutt a space to express her self through her characters. Thus while it was indecorous for Toru Dutt to speak in the direct persona of her self in her letters, the creation of fictionalized characters enforced a distance between her and the written text. The autonomous world of fiction was a convenient mode of self-expression for her as speaking through the fictionalized character helped resolve the tension and discomfort of speaking in the first person singular.

It provided her an outlet to articulate her specific experiences as a woman – her repressed desires, sad compromises and her frustrated anger. Therefore, the fictional
mode accommodated her feelings of desire. The next chapter studies the fictions written by Toru Dutt as a medium through which she could escape the restraints of a nineteenth century milieu, or at least find a fictional outlet for them.

Notes


1. The triadic pattern consists in the interplay between three subjective positions acquired by the shifting of the letter from the hands of the queen to the minister to Dupin. As the letter shifts in the hands of these three different persons, three patterns of intersubjective relationships are formed: "one subject sees nothing, hence is "blind" to the situation in which he finds himself; a second subject "sees" that the first subject sees nothing but "deludes himself as to the secrecy" of what he hides, that is unaware of being "seen" in turn; a third subject sees the first two subjects leave "what should be hidden exposed to whomever would seize it and capitalizes on this fact" (Lacan 1988:59).

2. In a personal letter written to his niece Indira Devi Choudhurani on March 6, 1893, Tagore relates an experience where he had to sing before the "sahibs," during one of his visits to Orissa. He explains from his experiences that the east was distinct from the west in its own terms and a blind imitation of the west would "trivialize ourselves":

....I listened to some English singing and sang to the sahibs in reply. I applauded and so did they. But does such appreciation show that the heart has been touched? Or is it just the curiosity that has been satisfied? ...what pleasure could their applause afford me? If we begin to rate the applause of Englishmen to highly we shall come to reject much that is good in us, and adopt much that is bad from them. We shall grow ashamed to go about without socks, for instance, and cease to feel shame at the sight of their ball dresses. We shall have no hesitation in throwing overboard our manners, and cheerfully emulate their customary lack of them... Handshakes and applause from fair-skinned hands are terribly important to us, and they are indeed visible marks of respect-but they undermine our authentic self respect. Consciously or unconsciously we come to mould our lives
according to whether we are clapped or not, and thus we trivialize ourselves (Tagore 2005: 17:35).


4. Heinrich Heine (1799-1856) German poet of the nineteenth century.

5. Carol Gilligan in her essay, “In a Different voice” demonstrates the centrality of the conceptions of responsibility and care in women’s constructions of the moral domain. She indicates a close tie between conceptions of the self and conceptions of morality in women’s thinking (Gilligan 1997:582).

6. Other associates who went with him were Pandit Madan Mohan Mallaviya, GD Birla, Mira Behn, Mahadev Desai etc.

7. Sylvia Pankhurst (1882-1960) was a notable campaigner for the Suffragette Movement in the United Kingdom. Lady Hydari was the wife of Akbari Hydari, the first Indian Governor of Assam.

Works Cited


