

# An analysis of Toru Dutt's approach to the ancient Indic mythological characters in her corpus

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**Abstract:** *The figure of Toru Dutt (1856-77) contains within it the sheer affect of an emergence of new possibilities in the enunciation of new paradigms towards a fresh understanding of the cultural and literary scenario in nineteenth century Bengal under the full impact of colonialism. In this instance, it has been endeavoured to delve into the life and works of the Bengali Christian writer Toru Dutt to show how religious identity and the colonial connection collectively shaped her oeuvre. The attempt here is to enunciate and envisage a distinct kind of Christian consciousness as can be gauged from her writings and show how that Christian approach influenced her poetical works which represented Hindu mythological characters. Along with the colonial connection, the question of religion (Christianity, in this instance) also assumes cardinal significance because of the author's personal conversion to that creed and also because of the rich allusions to that creed's doctrines, ideas and theological notions which can be discerned throughout her corpus. This article examines the manner in which Toru Dutt's sensibility encouraged the absorption of new ideas and trends which gave birth to a conscious endeavour to study foreign (primarily European) cultures.*

**Key Words:** *Christianity, Indic mythology, Indigenous Christian consciousness, Colonialism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The colonial European Christian influence prompted Toru Dutt (and to a greater extent, the Dutt family) to westernize mentally, socially and also in terms of religion whereby Christianity was held to be on a more elevated and sublime plane of morality that was worthy of being emulated. One of the best examples of the great influence of the Christian religion which permeated her intimate familiar circles is the collected anthology of poetry titled the *Dutt Family Album*. The invocation of Christian brotherhood on the part of the anonymous author of the Dutt family can serve as a yardstick for the deep and profound Christian convictions and faith cherished by the members of this illustrious literary family. It might also be mentioned in passing that Toru Dutt's mother Kshetramoni had translated into Bengali the book, *The Blood of Jesus* by Andrew Murray, although she never converted to Christianity along with her brothers and cousins. Contemporaneous upper echelons of Calcutta society, both Bengali and European, were full of praise for the Dutt family, especially Toru Dutt's father, Govind Chunder Dutt, who too had contributed a substantial portion of poems to the '*Dutt Family Album*.' Yet this work was never held in great esteem by the literary world of his time. As Rosinka Chaudhuri has stated:

"The tone in which critics have dealt with the poetry produced by the Dutt family has been generally dismissive. The Dutt family were writing in an age when the greatest respect was reserved for men like Bankimchandra, who were propagating Bengali. But even earlier, by the time of Madhusudan in the middle of the century, it had become unprofitable to be an Indian writing in English. As late as 1970, John B. Alphonso-Karkala, in *Indo-English Literature in The Nineteenth Century*, described the *Album* as 'typical of the earlier school of Indo-English poetry when poets were not daring enough to experiment with European metrical forms'. .....

These poems, and their aesthetic value or lack of it, exist meaningfully only within their historical context. Theodore Dunn was more accurate, in fact, about the value of the *Dutt Family Album*, when he said the book 'must be of abiding interest to the student of literary history in India.'<sup>1</sup>

This precisely was the context in which the young Toru Dutt had to write her works. But she did not let herself remain embedded within any particular literary tradition and kept herself unfettered from any kind of ideological predilections which means that she could approach her subject in a much more liberal and nuanced manner. The intermingling of Christianity and colonialism presents a unique instance of the cross-fertilisation of theology, politics and religion and this chapter will show how such a kind of cultural effervescence shaped the works of Dutt. Toru Dutt's

<sup>1</sup> Chaudhuri, Rosinka *The Dutt family Album And Toru Dutt*, in Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna (ed.) *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2016). Eighth impression, pp. 59-60.

intimate familiarity with the classical literature of Europe was part of the pedagogic tradition, thoroughly western in its provenance, which began to take roots in South Asia in the aftermath of the establishment of the colonial regime, a time when native connoisseurs of literature took interest and delight in discoursing and delineating upon the virtues of Graeco-Roman antiquity. But there comes a point of divergence and a fundamental dichotomy between what is called as 'Graeco-Roman antiquity' and 'Christian' sources of literary inspiration and fervour. The novelty lies in envisaging an amalgamation of the both the Christian and Graeco-Roman literary and cultural traditions by which a kind of *modus vivendi* would be envisaged in clearly delineating the socio-cultural milieu in which Toru Dutt flourished. This approach is important because in two of Dutt's novels, the protagonists are female characters and the entire plot and thrust of the story always revolves around them.

## 2. MYTHOLOGICAL MOTIFS AROUND INDIC MYTHOLOGY:

The 'Foreword' which the British historian H.A.L. Fisher wrote in Harihar Das's compendium of Toru Dutt's letters and poems reveals a very profound kind of attachment to the Christian faith on her path which Fisher found to be extremely praiseworthy.<sup>2</sup> Along with Christian faith, what Fisher found even more significant was the enunciation a series of literary works (poems, novels, translations from French poets) and how the driving force behind the creation of what Toru Dutt wrote was a kind of a peculiar 'Christian literary culture'. As Fisher says:

"The pious labours of Mr. Das have now added some welcome and altogether attractive touches. They show us how devoid Toru was of the foibles often attaching to the literary character, how exempt from ostentation, vanity, self-consciousness, how childlike and eager, with how a warm glow of affection she embraced her friends, how free was her composition from all bitter and combustible elements. They enable us also to realise how much she was helped by the fact of her Christian training to an appreciation of certain aspects of Western literature (her love of *Paradise Lost* and Lamartine are illustrations) not usually congenial to the Indian mind, and how personal friendships formed during a girlhood spent partly in France and partly in England united to strengthen her hold upon the essential soul of the two languages in which she wrought."<sup>3</sup>

Fisher here spoke about the pivotal significance of 'Christian training' which thoroughly permeated her works. By means of her own religious convictions, Toru Dutt was able to situate herself within different historical settings for her novels and her poems, which clearly showed how she felt at ease in straddling the different dimensions in the realm of literature which she assiduously cultivated.

Dutt was the product of the great interaction of cultures and religious faiths that occurred in Calcutta following the cultural and social reawakening which took place in the aftermath of the enunciation of the colonial connection in Bengal. The manner in which Toru Dutt's sensibility encouraged the absorption of new ideas and trends gave birth to the conscious endeavour towards the study of foreign (primarily European) cultures. The colonial European influence in Bengal which prompted Dutt (or to a greater extent the Dutt family) to westernise mentally, socially, and also in terms of religion - whereby Christianity was held to be based on a more elevated and sublime plane of morality and worthy of being emulated and practiced - becomes evident especially in the depiction of Marguerite and Bianca in her novels.

Toru Dutt's approach to the ancient Indic mythology, being the central theme of consideration here, deserves a closer inspection because of her own preparatory literary and social background when she prepared herself to devote her life to this task of writing *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. Dutt's initial interest into Indian mythology largely grew out of her ardent curiosity when she had, as an infant, beheld her mother recite stories from the Hindu scriptures and whose recitation, brought forth tears, simply due to the irresistible charm which lay in the ancient lays of India.<sup>4</sup>

The ballads primarily deal with common legends of Hindu mythology -- those of Savitri, Bharata, Dhruva etc. Toru's own readings in Sanskrit enabled her to perceive the ethical meaning with which many of these ancient legends were charged. On studying these poems individually, one would perceive that Dutt, in selecting these particular characters of Indian mythology, has a perception of the distant Indic past and how to present the characters from Hindu mythology. Also, Dutt has sought to renew her understanding of these mythological characters through a reinterpretation which reflected her Christian convictions and the literary taste which she had assiduously cultivated through her study of English and French literature. An outcome of this assessment was that the poet confirms the immortality, the permanence of these representatives of Hindu mythology and the qualities they stand for.

An identical attraction, a pull towards the native soil was experienced in the other spheres too - religious and cultural. Though for all purposes she formally accepted Christianity, the potent streak of Hinduism constantly stirred

<sup>2</sup> Das, Harihar. *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, Foreword by the Right Hon. H.A.L. Fisher, (April 3, 1920), pp. vii-ix.

<sup>3</sup> Das, *Life and Letters*, pp. viii.

<sup>4</sup> Das, Harihar *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, pp. 329-330.

within her and was aroused by the songs and myths of yore. It should be obvious that Christianity, while having a limiting influence towards mythological tales belonging to pre-Christian period, sharpened her perceptions of the need for rediscovering, if not recovering, her half-forsaken traditions of Hinduism. The translations from the Sanskrit were done by Dutt and her elder sister, Aru, though Toru herself played the major part in this translation venture. Without any explicit avowal, Toru's translations assume the character of a kind of transcendence for the distant Indic antique past which is not surprising because of her own temperament being attuned to that of French - a temperament that expresses one's unceasing quest for love, freedom and beauty.

There would definitely arise the question about the conflict between 'Indian' and foreign affiliations in her poems and whether such rigid dichotomies were indeed viable and present and if so, were they often at variance with each other, or lay converged under a common framework. *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* is an eloquent testimony to Toru's 'Indianness'. Toru's ardent love of Indian's glorious past is reflected in her ballads. Her conversion to Christianity, her European visit and her English education could not lessen her love for India's ancient religion and mythology. Despite her stay abroad and the peculiarity of her education and the fact of her sojourns to the West, she always nourished herself an inborn love for the Indian scene. This latent sympathy towards the Hindu mythological characters needs to be brought forth because of her extraordinary favourable portrayal of them.<sup>5</sup> Edmund Gosse in his Introductory Memoir to Dutt's posthumous *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* declared:

"Here, in a mystical retirement more irksome to an European in fancy than to an Oriental in reality, the brain of this wondrous child was moulded. She was pure Hindu, full of the typical qualities of her race and blood, and as the present volume shows us, for the first time, preserving to the last, her appreciation of the poetic side of her ancient religion, though faith itself in Vishnu and Shiva had been cast aside with childish things and been replaced by a purer faith."<sup>6</sup>

For instance, in the poem, 'The Legend of Dhruva', she introduces her theme in the following verses:

"Sprung from great Brahma, Manu had two sons,  
Heroic and devout, as I have said,  
Pryavrata and Uttanapado, - names,  
Known in legends; and of these the last  
Married two wives, Suruchee, his adored,  
The mother of a handsome petted boy  
Uttama; and Suneeteetee, less beloved,  
The mother of another son  
Was Dhruva."<sup>7</sup>

The poet is retelling the well-known story of Dhruva in English from the original Sanskrit and it bears a striking similarity in tone and tenor to the rustic recitations of identical mythological tales in the Indian context. In 'The Legend of Dhruva' we find the sense of duty prevailing when Dhruva declares that the throne should be given to Uttama. Dutt has imbibed the spirit of her subject well because without some form of intellectual sympathy for the religion whose mythological characters she is translating and rendering into English verse, this kind of apt yet sonorous description of a character (Dhruva, in this instance) does not seem feasible.

Taking an example from the tale of Savitri, the manner in which Dutt reiterates the despairing gesture of Savitri to Yama heightens the tragic scenario and expresses the ardent affection which she bore towards her husband which led her into the farthest promontories of hell itself. As Dutt writes:

"She took the clue, felt Death was Love,  
For no exceptions now he named,  
And boldly said, -- 'Thou knowest, Lord,  
The inmost hearts and thoughts of all!  
There is no need to utter word,  
Upon thy mercy sole, I call....'"<sup>8</sup>

In this interaction between Savitri and Yama, at a secondary level, one can visualize an interaction between the positive and negative features of society, between the demand for freedom for woman and the suppression of this freedom. The suppression of liberty is exemplified by Yama while Savitri's bold yet dignified entreaties reflect a

<sup>5</sup> This probable query about the change of attitude towards the Indic mythological tales as represented in Dutt's *Ancient Ballads and Legends* has also been probed by Meera Jagannathan, 'The Enigma of Toru Dutt', *Dalhousie French Studies*, Vol. 94 (Spring 2011), pp. 13-25.

<sup>6</sup> Dutt, Toru. *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, (London: Keegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1982). Pp. xi-xii.

<sup>7</sup> Dutt, Toru. 'The Legend of Dhruva, Vishnu Purana, Book I, Chapter XI', from *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, (London: Keegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1892). Pp. 71-72.

<sup>8</sup> Dutt, Toru. 'Savitri', *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, (London: Keegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1892) pp. 37.

desire for liberty and freedom from bondage. Dutt has portrayed Savitri in a delightful manner and has made her look at askance when she journeys to the ether world and expresses her objection to the abject fate and misfortune befallen upon her husband. By these verses, it seems that Dutt is fascinated and thereby faithfully renders the old tale of edifying conjugal and marital fidelity which distinguished women like Savitri in Indic mythology. It is quite remarkable that despite her ardent profession of the Christian faith, Dutt is sympathetic to and not averse from taking cues from mythological characters exemplifying different categories of virtue. Dutt's depiction of Sita and the despair in which she spends her days as a captive, far away from her spouse has a similar empathy informing it. As she writes:

“But who is this fair lady? Not in vain  
She weeps, - for lo! At every tear she sheds  
Tears from three pairs of young eyes fall amain,  
And bowed in sorrow are the three young heads.  
It is an old, old story, and the lay.....”<sup>9</sup>

A striking aspect of this ballad is no doubt the style in which Sita's accusations and Lakshman's heart-rending responses are rendered and her sad predicament and the perpetual melancholy of her captivity depicted. What the poet was undergoing was perhaps a colonial crisis of identity where the native culture which so long had been suppressed by a presumably superior language and culture, now came to the fore and rapturous praise was bestowed upon the mythological characters of Indic antiquity.

This arcane amalgamation of Dutt's ardent enthusiasm and inclinations to accept and embrace mythological motifs from the 'Puranic' era contrasted strangely with her own rigidly upheld Christian faith and its political resonance in the practical world of actuality. Dutt's self-affiliation with the fallen fortunes of France (during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71) in battle testifies to her ardent identification with the predicament of the French. Edmund Gosse duly noted this,

“...but it would seem that the marvellous faculties of Toru's mind still slumbered, when, in her thirteenth year, her father decided to take his daughters to Europe to learn English and French. To the end of her days Toru was a better French than English scholar. She loved France best, she knew its literature best, she wrote its language with the most perfect elegance.”<sup>10</sup>

Precisely equivalent was the comment of her long time English acquaintance Clarisse Bader who in agreement with Gosse's views, wrote:

“Toru was an earnest Christian, and she thought that the misfortunes that befell France at this time were due to the depravity of the French people. She remained unshaken in her love for the French and in spite of their defeat and of her Christian education, which caused her consider the downfall of France as a punishment for irreligion.”<sup>11</sup>

### 3. CONCLUSION:

In inference, it can be said that despite her Christian upbringing, she never completely tried to engage in any kind of self-isolation from the cultural milieu of his times. The best testimony to that was in her endeavours to learn the Sanskrit language. From a purely Christian point of view, all pre-Christian mythologies are merely heathenish and only fit for intellectual enquiry but any kind of devotional interest in them was unbecoming of a devout Christian. Toru Dutt succeeded in transcending the purely Christian milieu and this enabled her to treat with sympathy and gusto the characters from the mythological characters from the Puranas. Despite being an ardent reader of English and French literature, she did not cut herself completely off from the indigenous roots in which her parents had been born and which her mother still retained. Being a Christian did not necessarily mean in her instance, that she would wantonly denigrate the Hindu religion to which most of her extended family kinsmen still belonged. Toru Dutt's wide curiosity for Indic religions made her revert to treat subjects from Hindu mythology and this led her to compose the '*Ancient ballads and Legends of Hindustan*.' Moreover, she never forsook her wider identity as a Bengali and never affected to mimic English ways and mores and any other European social custom to which she could not relate herself or felt uncomfortable. Despite moving in the higher echelons of the European society in colonial Calcutta, to which she and her family secured entrance because of her father's eminence and high office (as an administrative functionary), she never affected to engage in any kind of vanity or looked down on those who were down her social scale. She maintained an attitude of equanimity

<sup>9</sup> Dutt, Toru. 'Sita', from *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, (London: Keegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1892). Pp. 121-22.

<sup>10</sup> Gosse, Edmund 'Introductory Memoir', Dutt, Toru. *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, (London: Keegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1982) xii.

<sup>11</sup> Das, Harihar, *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, pp. 39.

to both ancient Indian and European literatures and never felt or even deigned to enunciate to create any literary hierarchy and put the Indian one at a lower scale than the European.

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