"Exotic Blossom" or Cosmopolitan Victorian?: Toru Dutt and Fin-de-Siècle London and Calcutta

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Abstract

What did it mean to be a young, female Bengali writer living in late nineteenth-century Calcutta but also in London and Cambridge? What did it mean to be raised within a family protected by its wealth and status but also ostracised in India for its religious and cultural iconoclasm – more specifically for its collective conversion from Hinduism to Christianity and consequent loss of caste? This paper presents the literary work of Toru Dutt (1856-1877) and the reception in both Britain and India of her posthumous collections *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1880) and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882)

Introduction

This paper introduces the life and legacy of Toru Dutt (1856-1877), the Indian-born poet, who in her brief span of twenty one years, lived an extensively-travelled and cross-cultural life in India, France and Britain. Unusually, for her time, she was proficient and creatively active in Bengali, English, French and Sanskrit. It is the critical success and posthumous reception in London and in Calcutta of her translations from French poetry into English, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876) and reinterpretations in English of Sanskrit epic and religious poetry *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882), That I consider here.[1]

As such, Toru Dutt wrote and should, I suggest, be read, in the continuing context of "social cosmopolitanism", by which this paper refers to traditions of personal, cultural and creative travel that have led to the intersection and corresponding expansion of different worlds, locales and times in the person and work of the traveller. Her poetry is multivocal in act and ambition. In other words, it contains within it the 'many voices' of the places she lived in and visited. This paper extends an understanding of that multivocality by presenting her work to a twenty first century readership, with whom, it is hoped, her multilimgualism and ability to cross cultural boundaries with knowledge and understanding, will resonate. It is also hoped that the readership of this paper will seek to apply the internationalism and capacity to hear and respond

[1] A few poems in the collection appear to have been translated by her sister Aru Dutt, and their father, Govin Chunder Dutt, probably influenced the collection as well.

to the ‘many voices’ of the several cultures at play in contemporary global society, that are exemplified in the life of Toru Dutt. The further reach of this paper, by which is meant its “afterlife” in the thoughts and actions of its readership, is a matter of collective choice and action.

Early Life, the Mutiny of 1857 and Travel to France and England

Who *was* Toru Dutt? Born in 1856, a year before the largescale violence of 1857, alternately termed the Sepoy Mutiny or the Great Rebellion depending on the perspective adopted by historians. She grew up in a Calcutta which had remained largely untouched by the conflict. Rosinka Chaudhuri, in her study of the traditions of English language poetry that developed in Calcutta over the course of the nineteenth century, has termed this time in Bengal “the loyal hours,” (2002 pp.127-58). The phrase is borrowed from a collection published in 1876 by Toru’s uncle Greece Chunder Dutt on the occasion of the Prince of Wales’ visit to India. It underwrites the lack of support seen in Bengal for the mutinying regiments and their leaders, who were largely established in northern and western India.

Toru, whom I will refer to by her first name, in keeping with Bengali critical tradition, was born into a wealthy, educated and literary family. Their pro-British affiliations could be said to have been vindicated by the defeat of the mutineers and the sentiments of the population of Calcutta and the Bengal province at large. Yet, she could hardly have failed to have known the long shadow cast by the events of 1857. This paper argues that a hardening and simplification of the perceived categories of “race” and “nation” is symptomatic of societies in a state of post-traumatic stress[2]. Hence, the country saw a widening of the gap in sympathies between those who perceived themselves as “British” and those who perceived themselves as “Indian.” After 1858, the East India Company gave way to Queen Victoria’s government in India. The more conservative forces within this newly established government, as well as the orthodox elements within Bengali society, gained ascendance. Both looked with deep suspicion at any attempt to complicate a ‘monological’ view of identity. By ‘monological,’ this paper refers to a view of identity founded in only one cultural source of meaning, i.e. either Britain or India, but not both.

[2] The term “post traumatic stress disorder” was only formally recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. The recognition that traumas following from war and conflict can affect a civilian population is only now taking shape, as the report “Afghanistan: PTSDLand” published by the Pulitzer Centre on Crisis Reporting, suggests. This paper puts forward the view that stress and trauma following the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 are likely to have affected not only combatants, but also the larger society of which they were a part. The violence unleashed did not, of course, take place in zones removed from cities and villages, but in their midst.

Thus, the poet and educator David Lester Richardson (1801-1865), who had been one of a circle of bicultural poets and writers who published their poetry and prose for a readership in Calcutta as well as London up until the mid-1850s, was disallowed from taking up the prestigious appointment of Professor of English Literature at Presidency College, Calcutta. In 1861, after the Secretary of State for India had intervened to prevent his acceptance, Richardson left India. At the same time, other "Anglo-Indian" writers and poets, or those of British birth or ancestry who had *lived* most or all of their lives in India, such as Toru's senior contemporary, the poet Mary Eliza Leslie (1834 - ?), found themselves in a state of conflict and confusion as to their rightful affiliations.

In Toru's case, the "complication of a monological identity" was a very condition of her existence. Not only was she a young girl educated to an extent that was highly uncommon amongst her contemporaries, be they denizens of India or of Britain, but she was also a practising Christian. Her father, Govin Chunder Dutt, and her two uncles Greece and Hur Chunder as well as their families, were all baptised after the death of a fourth uncle, Kissen. Kissen's final request was for his brothers to embrace Christianity (Gibson, 2011 a, p. 287). They did so with a commitment and dedication that appear not to have wavered in the face of the criticism and rejection of their immediate family, as well as of Hindu Brahmanical society at large.

Contemporary Bengali society would have viewed the Dutts as, at best, wealthy eccentrics, at worst as uncategorisable apostates. The more orthodox members of the social circles that surrounded the civil and military infrastructure of the British Indian state, headed by a succession of Viceroys appointed from London, were not likely to have found it easy to worship alongside or socialise with the Dutts. The easygoing inter-cultural relations of the early nineteenth-century were, perhaps, under siege in Calcutta in Toru's time. It is probable that distrust and memories of loss and violence generated by the events of 1857, pushed communities, friends and neighbours apart.

In the case of Toru and her sister Aru, dislocation from contemporary Calcutta following from the family decision to convert to Christianity was further complicated by the level of education they pursued. The sisters studied Bengali, English and French, while, later on, Toru also took up the study of Sanskrit. Family life appears to have been continually marked by the search for a welcoming environment, which was perhaps further motivated by the constant experience of loss. Shortly after their conversion they moved to Bombay for a year, then returned to Calcutta. Abju, Toru's elder brother, then died in 1866 at the age of fourteen. Eventually, perhaps hoping for a complete change from the divided and unforgiving environment they encountered in Calcutta, the Dutts left the country altogether in 1869 for a three year visit to France and England. For a few months the two sisters attended a *pensionnat* in Nice, after which

the family moved again to Cambridge, where the girls attended the Higher Lectures for Women at the University of Cambridge (Gibson, 2011a, p. 295).

Despite the constant search for a place in which to settle, or, perhaps, because of it, a sense of ongoing isolation, counteracted by a vital desire for community, recognition and acceptance, is clear in almost every word written by Toru Dutt.

Social Cosmopolitanism in England, Isolation in Calcutta

Her lyric poem "Near Hastings," which appears in the "Miscellaneous Poems" section of *Ancient Ballads and Legends,* seems to tell the story of a chance encounter. Toru and the much loved and slightly older Aru, who died of tuberculosis in 1874 (a mere three years before Toru also succumbed to it), wander along a beach in south-east England and meet a local woman. Autobiographical elements within the poem suggest that it is based on an actual incident that may have taken place when the Dutts were living in St. Leonards-on-Sea in East Sussex, in 1873 ("Toru Dutt" n.d.):

> Near Hastings, on the shingle-beach,
> We loitered at the time
> When ripens on the wall the peach,
> The autumn's lovely prime.
> Far off,--the sea and sky seemed blent,
> The day was wholly done, The distant town its murmurs sent,
> Strangers,—we were alone. (ls. 1-8, 127)

This appears a probable image of the two sisters at a distance from the town and uncomfortably aware of their own status as "strangers," uncertain of their position and place. It also contains references to the sickness that, by this time, it was probably clear, Aru was not to escape:

> We wandered slow; sick, weary, faint,
> Then one of us sat down,
> [...]
> A lady past, she was not young,
> But oh! her gentle face
> No painter-poet ever sung,
> Or saw such saint-like grace. (9-10, 13-16, p. 127)

The apotheosis of female virtue is a common theme in Toru Dutt's poetry. This may also be seen in the characterisation of Savitri, the angelic Princess-wife, in the long narrative poem of the same name which opens the collection. Savitri, however, is able to rescue her husband from certain death, as she persuades Yama, the God of death, to spare him and grant additional boons to her family. Female protagonists who offer rescue and salvation rather than conforming to a passive ideal of femininity, speak, perhaps, to Toru's attempt to excavate or create a platform for a female perspective in her readings of the *Mahabharat* and other Sanskrit source texts.

In her personal lyric poetry, there appears to be more of a sense of a female-to-female engagement. Perhaps this reflects Toru's real life experiences of finding comfort and acceptance in strong female friendships. First, in her relationship with her sister, and, thereafter in her literary correspondence with the French writer and historian, Clarisse Bader. Mary Martin, daughter of Reverend John Martin of Sidney Sussex College, whom she met when the family made Cambridge their home between 1871 and 1872 ("Toru Dutt"n.d.), was another longstanding female friend.

In this case, there is no apparent history or longevity to the encounter. It is, instead, a moment of kindly intervention from a female stranger, which appears to bring relief from alienation. A shared experience of spontaneous community is sparked, as the poem continues:

> She past us, --then she came again,
> Observing at a glance
> That we were strangers; one, in pain, --
> She asked,--Were we from France?
> We talked awhile,--some roses red
> That seemed as wet with tears,
> She gave my sister, and she said.
> "God bless you both, My dears!" (17-24, pp. 127-128)

One might read this as a "socially cosmopolitan" moment, whether real or imagined, during which a native of the English East Coast connects with the two sisters in an imaginative gesture which goes beyond any immediate markers of "race," to include France as a possible point of origin.

Access to such an immediate cosmopolitanism seems to have eluded Toru in India itself, except in regard to her historical vision of the country and the readership she was able to sustain for her work in the *Calcutta Review* and the *Bengal Magazine* from 1874 onwards (Gibson, 2011 a, p. 295). Thus, the second half of *Ancient Ballads and Legends*, containing lyrics and sonnets of a more personal nature than the first half, references a close-knit family circle that seems set

apart from the world beyond it. This closeness is reflected in "The Tree of Life," "Sonnet-Baugmaree" and "The Casuarina Tree." "The Tree of Life" recounts moments with her father in what appear to be the final stages of her illness, while the two sonnets record an Edenic visualisation of the garden in Baugmaree where the Dutts had a second home. The poems in this section which contain public references focus on revolutionary France and the Franco-Prussian war, as in "On the Fly-Leaf of Erckmann-Chatrian's novel entitled 'Madame Thérèse,'" and 'France: 1870.'

Nowhere in Toru's poetry or letters can one find references to the kind of social connection and acceptance within India itself, that she appears to have found in England and France. On the contrary, she writes to Mary Martin on the subject of the Dutts' much discussed return to England after Aru passed away, "you are quite mistaken to think that we should be greatly missed [by friends and relatives] if we leave Calcutta" (as cited in Foss 2008, p. 164).

An isolation in Calcutta that only just fell a little short of ostracism can be imagined for the Dutt family. Writing again to Mary Martin, Toru says "there are some orthodox families who will not mix with friends and relations who have been to England, unless these make the necessary purifications ordained in the Hindu shastras and by pundits" (as cited in Foss 2008, p.164). This was most probably a reference to the idea held by orthodox Hindus that those who crossed the sea had lost their caste, and so could not mix with other Hindus for fear of contamination.

The Dutts, of course, can be thought to have lost their original caste several times over – not only had they crossed the sea at least twice by this time, but they had also voluntarily converted to Christianity. This was an act that would have put them beyond the pale of the caste system in any case, and that also cut them off from that extended family to which they would have looked for support and acceptance. She writes of her maternal grandmother, "she is, I am sad to say, still a Hindu" and "I wish she would become a Christian" (as cited in Foss, 2008, p. 165). On another occasion, explaining to Martin why she could not attend a cousin's marriage, Toru explains in a matter-of-fact tone that does not quite serve to hide the hurt behind it, "she is a Hindu and so is her family, so of course we were not invited" (as cited in Foss 2008, p. 164).

When Toru Dutt eventually lost her battle with tuberculosis and passed away on 30th August 1877, she was buried in the Church Missionary Society Cemetery in Calcutta (Gibson, 2011 a, p. 297) and it is doubtful whether any of her extended family came to pay their respects.

Posthumous Fame in London, Edmund Gosse and the Present-day Implications of Social Cosmopolitanism

However, very shortly afterwards, her work started to gather a growing readership in both Calcutta and London. Edmund Gosse, (1859-1928), the poet, biographer, translator and critic

favourably reviewed the first edition of *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876) for the *Examiner* in 1877. This first Indian edition was followed by a second in 1878 and a third was published in London in 1880 by Kegan Paul. Toru's father saw to the publication of two complete novels discovered amongst her papers after her death. *Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden,* which is possibly the first novel in English by an Indian woman writer appeared in Calcutta's *Bengal Magazine* (1878) and *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers,* which may be the first novel in French by an Indian writer, appeared in Paris in 1879 (Foss,2008, p.161 -162).

Finally, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, which Toru's father compiled posthumously from her manuscripts and work, which had appeared in periodicals in India, then appeared in London in 1882, with a glowing introductory memoir by Gosse. He writes:

> It is difficult to exaggerate when we try to estimate what we have lost in the premature death of Toru Dutt. Literature has no honours which need have been beyond the grasp of a girl who at the age of twenty-one, and in languages separated from her own by so deep a chasm, had produced so much of lasting worth (*Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, "Introductory Memoir," xxvii).

Reading Gosse's words, one might think that Toru had found a reader able to enter into the "social cosmopolitanism" that appears to have been a real or, at least, a much desired feature of her literary and lived relationship with English culture *in* England itself.

However, Gosse's language is riven by an uncertainty, and even a resistance, that seems to stem from what can only be described as an essentialist view of "race" and "culture." He appears to be unable to separate what he perceives as the unalterable fact of Toru's "Hindu" ethnicity from his readings of her work, which causes one rather to wonder what his judgement might have been if he had read her poetry without any knowledge of her name or identity.

Her Christianity seems almost a superficial gloss in his eyes. Thus, he writes:

> She was pure Hindu, full of the typical qualities of her race and blood [....] Her mother fed her imagination with the old songs and legends of their people, stories which it was the last labour of her life to weave into English verse (xi- xii).

Toru's mother may have inspired her daughter with stories told during childhood, as suggested by internal evidence in the poem "Sita", which appears in *Ancient Ballads and Legends.* However, it is also true that Toru's reinterpretations of Sanskrit texts were made after a careful acquisition of the language and study of its texts with the aid of a pundit. While this is mentioned later on in the memoir, Gosse's idea that there is an almost physical tangibility to Toru Dutt's 'otherness,' or alterity, which must set her apart from the London she sought so hard to embrace, persists.

Ending with a reference to the premature death which did not allow her to mature fully, he writes in a doubled edged tone:

> That mellow sweetness was all that Toru lacked to perfect her as an English poet, and of no other Oriental who has ever lived can the same be said. When the history of the literature of our country comes to be written, there is sure to be a page dedicated in it to this fragile exotic blossom of song (xxvii).

It might be possible to argue that Gosse's discomfort with Toru's ease and facility in English and French and his attempt to exoticise her while, at the same time, receiving her into the canon of English literature, stemmed from historical fractures in the cosmopolitanism that linked Victorian London and Victorian Calcutta. That is, his reliance on the idea of an unnegotiable "otherness" that resulted from her "race and blood," determines his readings of her work. His mind appears closed to the idea that she might have developed as profound an understanding of "English verse" as any poet of English descent. The local woman of "Near Hastings," on the other hand, receives Toru and her sister with little acknowledgement of racial or cultural difference. While she may or may not be a creation of Toru's imagination, she does embody a social cosmopolitanism that moves beyond the idea of Hindu/Christian, Indian/English, East/West as binary oppositions.

If this is the case, one might also argue that both that social cosmopolitanism and the fractures along the lines of the binary oppositions to which it offers an alternative, are still available to us. They may, indeed, shape our interpretation of the world in the twenty first century. The idea – or, indeed, the need to believe in – a demarcation of the world into East and West is not a harmless one, as now appears particularly clear in a post-Brexit context. Nor is it harmless in a global context in which significant numbers of people feel it is incumbent on them to choose between the perceived "East" and the perceived "West," and are then drawn into a polarisation and, in extremity, a militarisation of their positions.

In presenting the life and work of Toru Dutt, I hope to have made the case for her wider recognition – not simply as an Indian poet writing in English – but as a cosmopolitan Victorian. I hope to have also made the case for her increasing relevance in our own time, as we seek to find idioms and traditions to address our current needs. Her legacy can, perhaps, help us to confront and renegotiate the invidious dualisms which threaten to destabilise and remake for the worse, our global society.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the reviewer of this article, for his or her patient and comprehensive notes and suggestions.

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