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### **Abstract**

Poetry represents human thoughts. The internal conflicts that a poet develops right from his/her childhood leaves a grave impression on their mind as they grew up. Sometimes society too plays a great role in the life of a poet. Every poet gathers inspiration from some source both internally or externally. Toru Dutt is such a leading Indian woman poet in English who translated many French poems into English. The love for learning she developed right from her childhood and this specialty made her to learn three languages. One can observe the influence of sacred Hindu texts like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Puranas* on her poetry. Her poem "Our Casuarina Tree" celebrates her reminiscence of a happy childhood she spent in India with her beloved siblings. The Casuarina Tree in the poem is used as a symbolic representation of the poet's memories of the past.

**Keywords:** Poetic Imagination, Hindu philosophy, Symbolism, Epics, and Myths

The Indian Poetry in English started with verse romances, melody, and lyrics; or it may be appropriate to say that it began with romanticism. It is Prof. V. K. Gokak who divided the Indo-Anglican poetry roughly into six phases: 1825-1850 – the First Phase, 1851-1875 – the Second Phase, 1876-1900 – the Third Phase, 1901-1925 – the Fourth Phase, 1926-1950 – the Fifth Phase, and 1951-1965 – the Sixth Phase. According to the critics of Indian Poetry in English, the poetry which sprouted during the time period of 1876 to 1925 can be phrased as Indo-Anglian Romanticism. It is believed that in India, the poetry first instigated in Bengal, the province which was under the dominion of British for many years. The pioneers of Indo-Anglian literature were men of letters and the majority of upper class who made their meticulous attempts to explain the significance of ethical and cultural values of India to the West through a new form of genre known as 'imaginative literature.' They took the help of five different forms of imaginative literature i.e., Fantasy, Fairytale, Myth, Legend, and Fable in order to give precision to their works. Consequently, one can understand the growth and development of Indian poetry on the pasture of Indo-Anglican literature is a result of many trials, struggles for convention, independence, improvement and replication. Right from the beginning, almost all the poets of Indian origin who are writing in English were found to be holding two torrents, foreign influences and Indian elements in poetry.

The poets who appeared before Henry Louis Vivian Derozio made Christian sentiments and traditions, Nature, and Indian legends as their subject matter and framed their works. As it is believed that the history of Indo-Anglian poetry begins with Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, he is credited as being the first Indian English poet. It may be more precise to say that the literary awakening in Indian poetry dawned from the time of Derozio. Based on the comments made by K. R. Ramachandran Nair, on Derozio in his book entitled, *Three Indo-Anglian Poets*, Miss Sheshalatha Reddy opines,

"... Derozio is Indian despite his race, which included "very little Indian blood." Other factors such as place of birth and upbringing, friends and professional affiliations and the "themes and sentiments" of his poetry instead supposedly mark him as Indian." <sup>1</sup>

Derozio's ideas found a shallow influence on eminent poets of Bengal like Toru Dutt, Manmohan Ghose, Sri Aurobindo Ghose, Sarojini Naidu, and Rabindranath Tagore. The said poets prospered their works under a romantic strain and were sharply influenced by Victorian poetry in mild and Romantic poetry in strict sense. They were mainly swept by a feeling of optimism and nationalist movement. Their writings, which are filled with the landscapes, moods, fancies, and dreams, started showing the essence of Keats, Wordsworth, T. S. Eliot, and Shakespeare. But the real credit goes to Toru Dutt who received the prominent place in the hearts of lovers of Indian poetry. She even remembered today for the eternal charm she brought in her poetical works. Though her

poetic career is momentary, she survived like a poet of versatile genius. Under a mark of respect, the noted French critic and writer, James Darmesteter gave a compliment to Toru Dutt, “The daughter of Bengal, so admirable and so strangely gifted, Hindu by race and tradition and an English woman by education, a French woman a heart, a poet in English, prose writer in French, who at the age of 18 made India acquainted with the poets of French herself, who blended in herself three souls and three traditions, died at the age of 21 in the full bloom of her talent and on the eve of awakening of her genius, presents in the history of literature a phenomenon without parallel.”<sup>2</sup>

Born in 1856, in a renowned Indian family, Toru Dutt had the advantage of a better education and friendly environment that helped to nourish the poetess in her. In her writings, Toru Dutt connected the Indian mythology and fiction with English literature. She was the daughter of Gobinda Chandra Dutt who was a linguist and a versifier. He converted to Christianity (baptised) in 1860s when Toru was six years old. He was a man of great thought; he was of the view that - the greater our intercourse with the European gentlemen, the greater will be our improvement in literary, social and political affairs. So he provided the best possible English education to his three children and Toru Dutt was the youngest among them. In 1869, Toru Dutt moved with her family to live in France and then England. Toru and her siblings – Abju (brother) and Aru (sister) were not sent to school, but had private tutors to teach them English literature and western music. She continued her higher studies in French even when she was living in England. In this way, she became proficient in Bengali, English, and French and later in Sanskrit as well. When she returned to her native land, she brought with her from Europe a store of knowledge that would have adequate enough to make an English or French girl seem learned.

The contribution that Toru Dutt gave to literature is highly remarkable. Her literary pieces have a touch of emotional notes which grabbed the hearts of the lovers of Indian English literature. She wrote two novels namely, *Bianca* or *The Young Spanish Maiden* (unfinished), written in English and *Le journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers*, written in French. She translated nearly 250 French poems into English composed by famous French poets. Her translations and adaptations from Sanskrit to English are also appreciable which are published under the title, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. Though she translated and composed many poems, her position as a poet of eminence rests chiefly on a handful of much anthologized poems like “Our Casuarina Tree”, “My Vocation”, “Sita”, “Savitri”, “The Lotus”, and “Tree of Life.” One can find a great respect, beauty and vivid image of Nature in the poems of Toru Dutt. For this forte, she often called as ‘Keats’ of the Indo-English literature. The most significant aspect of Dutt’s literary career was her use of the rich Indian heritage of myth and folklore. In *Ancient Ballads* she converted popular stories from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* into English verse. The best of these, probably one of the best individual compositions in Indian poetry in English is “Our Casuarina Tree.” The poem, reminiscent in both form and content of Keats’ odes, is about memory, imagination and transcendence. The beautiful tree in the poet’s garden at Baumaree becomes, by the end of the poem, a symbol not only of the poet’s joyous childhood but also, through an extension in time and space, of the poet’s longing for permanence and eternity.

“Our Casuarina Tree” consists of five stanzas of eleven lines each. The rhyme scheme of the poem is *abba cddc eee*. The poem, though written in 1881, it is written in plain English and is easy to understand. The poem is set when the poetess is abroad somewhere on the coast of France or Italy and is recollecting the days about her childhood spent in her garden under the shade of the Casuarina tree, playing with her childhood companions. The tone in the poem is one of remembrance. She misses her childhood companions and misses the tree and her home where she grew up. The theme of “Our Casuarina Tree” is about lasting relationships. While on the surface it seems like the poem is only about the Casuarina tree, it is more about her cordial connection with her childhood companions which she dearly misses. The Casuarina tree is a symbol of their affectionate friendship and thus she writes an ode to it. The Casuarina tree in the poem becomes symbolic and holds a special place in the poetess’ heart. Even though all of them get separated on various grounds, the Casuarina tree still stayed as it was in past. It became the symbol of their everlasting friendship and thus became dearer in the eyes of the poetess. Very opening line of the poem suggests a simile. It opens with a

description of the tree, tall enough to make it seem like it touches the stars, strong enough to continue growing despite scars on its trunk and despite all this it provides support to a creeper,

*Like a huge Python, winding round and round  
The rugged trunk, indented deep with scars,  
Up to its very summit near the stars,  
A creeper climbs, in whose embraces bound  
No other tree could live... ("Our Casuarina Tree")<sup>3</sup>*

The giant Casuarina is a commonly found tree in Bengal. The Casuarina tree of Toru is very big; though great creepers embrace it, the tree is bold enough to stand. Crimson flowers are also hung on the tree. The tree remains very busy during the day. Day and night it is a centre of busy life. Birds and bees are gathered. At night sweet songs of darkening could be heard.

In the second stanza, the poetess relates, in a tone of intimacy, the sights and the song enjoyed by her out of her association with that tree. She goes on to tell us about the mornings in her childhood when she would wake up to the sight of the Casuarina tree. Whatever may be the season either summer or winter, her morning would remain incomplete without the sight of the Casuarina tree, often with a baboon sitting on its crest. His puny also leaps about. She then paints a serene picture of the morning with the Kokilas (Cuckoos) singing, the cows on the pasture and the water lilies in the spring. However, the figure of the Casuarina tree stands central in this picture, as it does in the morning and even in the life of the poetess,

*When first my casement is wide open thrown  
At dawn, my eyes delighted on it rest;  
Sometimes, and most in winter,—on its crest  
A gray baboon sits statue-like alone  
Watching the sunrise; while on lower boughs  
His puny offspring leap about and play;  
And far and near kokilas hail the day;...*

There remains no doubt in believing, "Our Casuarina Tree" as Toru's most representative poem. It reveals the influence of Keats on her. The first two stanzas are an imaginative and sensuous description of the Casuarina tree which is copious with imagery taken from Nature. It is known fact that the poems of Toru Dutt represent the animated vision of the ecological atmosphere. She is very much aware of the ecological diversity of India which her poems exhibit in full vitality. Her poems are true reflections of her immense love for each and every aspect of Nature that surrounds her. The objects of nature such as – birds, animals, flowers, fruits and trees immensely appealed to her. As Mrs. A. Vijayalakshmi rightly remarks,

"... Nature as an inspiring force is a recurrent theme in Indo-Anglican poetry. The most celebrated and oft – anthologized poem, "Our Casuarina Tree," which immortalized not only the tree but also the poetess, is replete with nature descriptions. The poem is a fine poetic tribute to the Casuarina tree in her family garden."<sup>4</sup>

The first two stanzas, thus, also confirm Milton's conception of what poetry should be – "simple, sensuous and impassioned." But the tone changes to melancholic reflections in the third stanza.

In the third stanza, Toru Dutt explains why the Casuarina tree is so dear to her. She says that not only because of its magnificence the tree is dear to her, but also because she, her brother and sister (both of them are now dead) used to play together beneath the tree when they were little children. In this way, the touching recollection of past creates an emotional bond between her and the Tree. Whenever she saw the Casuarina tree she was reminded of her childhood and the time she spent with her siblings. She held her siblings in great regard and the tree becomes a symbol of experiences they had. It was for this very reason that she loved the Casuarina tree and would remember her childhood companions whenever she thought of it. She further sobs saying that the image of the Casuarina tree rises in her memory till her eyes become dim with tears.

*... O sweet companions, loved with love intense,  
For your sakes, shall the tree be ever dear.  
Blent with your images, it shall arise*

*In memory, till the hot tears blind mine eyes!...*

In the fourth stanza, the Casuarina tree now assumes a human form. It feels and speaks. It has pain and pleasure like humans. Toru talks of how the “lament” of the tree can be heard by her even when she is far away, off the coasts of France and Italy. She hears this song whenever she’s near the coasts, strolling under the moonlight, and is reminded of the Casuarina tree. We may infer that in her moments of peace and calm, her memory jogs back to her childhood which is inextricably linked with the Casuarina tree and she draws up a mental image of the tree as it existed in its prime, in her childhood. The Casuarina tree becomes an objective correlative from fourth stanza onwards. It is the symbol of her brother and sister’s unbeatable memory. She can hear the wailing of the Casuarina tree wherever she goes. It follows her to distant lands; she can hear its plaintive music even in the distant shores of France and Italy, when the waves gently kiss the shores beneath the moon,

*... And every time the music rose,—before  
Mine inner vision rose a form sublime,  
Thy form, O Tree, as in my happy prime  
I saw thee, in my own loved native clime.*

Therefore, in the last stanza of the poem, she says she would gladly create a monument in the honour of the tree, for that is how much the tree is beloved to her. She also wishes that the tree grow for years to come and be counted in the list of the deathless trees of Borrowdale, which sheltered death and even time. She finally wishes that her love become so strong that it saves the Casuarina tree from its demise. No doubt, the tone of the last stanza of the poem is definitely one of triumph - triumph of immortality over death, loss and oblivion. The Casuarina tree will remain immortal and it will keep alive the memory of her dead brother and sister, though her own poetry is too weak to confer immortality on them! Love will defend her dear ones from the curse of oblivion.

*... Dearer than life to me, alas, were they!  
Mayst thou be numbered when my days are done  
With deathless trees—like those in Borrowdale,  
Under whose awful branches lingered pale  
“Fear, trembling Hope, and Death, the skeleton,  
And Time the shadow;” and though weak the verse  
That would thy beauty fain, oh, fain rehearse,  
May Love defend thee from Oblivion’s curse.*

Many critics admired and agreed that – in the organization of the poem as a whole and in the finish of individual stanza, in its mastery of phrase and rhythm, in its music of sound and ideas: “Our Casuarina Tree” is a superb piece of writing which gives us a taste of Indianness.

## **References**

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