

Classic Poetry Series

**Toru Dutt
- poems -**

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Toru Dutt(4 March 1856 - 30 August 1877)

Toru Dutt was an Indian poet who wrote in English and French, and made a mark in literature in spite of her premature death.

Early Life

She remained in Calcutta till November 1869, after which she and her sister Aru traveled to France, Italy and then England. She went to a school in France for the first time of her life and had an intimacy with French during that period.

Publishing Career

After publication of several translations and literary discussions, she published a Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields, a volume of French poems she had translated into English, with Saptahiksambad Press of Bhowanipore, India in 1876. Eight of the poems had been translated by her elder sister Aru. This volume came to the attention of Edmund Gosse in 1877, who reviewed it quite favorably in the Examiner that year. Sheaf would see a second Indian edition in 1878 and a third edition by Kegan Paul of London in 1880, but Dutt lived to see neither of these triumphs. she wrote many poems for the rank and the file.

Posthumous Publications

At the time of her death, she left behind two unpublished novels— Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers (thought to be the first novel in French by an Indian writer) and Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden (thought to be the first novel in English by an Indian woman writer)—in addition to an unfinished volume of original poems in English, Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan. Her father, Govin Chunder Dutt, ensured that these works would be published posthumously: Bianca in Calcutta's Bengal Magazine (1878), Le Journal by Didier of Paris (1879), and Ancient Ballads with Kegan Paul (1882).

Gosse wrote an Introductory Memoir for Ancient Ballads. There he observed, "Her name . . . is no longer unfamiliar in the ear of any well-read man or woman" (vii). Indeed, according to Gosse, "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" (xxvi). Gosse thus concludes the Introductory Memoir by insisting, "When the history of the literature of our

country comes to be written, there is sure to be a page in it dedicated to this fragile exotic blossom of song" (xxvii).

Prithwindra Mukherjee translated her famous novel *Le Journal* into Bengali, serialised it in the monthly *Basumati*, before bringing it out in a book form in 1956, with a foreword by Premendra Mitra. Once again, Prithwindra Mukherjee serialised its English translation in 1963, in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* with line drawings by Mario. Her *Ancient Ballads* was a great beginning in Indo-Anglian writing. She also knew German.

Though a British by up-bringing, she was a harsh critic of the behavior of the British towards Indians. As a diligent reader of newspapers, she was aware of all the cases of injustice reported daily, and they filled her with bitterness against the British. There was the case of a person who was sentenced to three weeks of hard labour because he had defended himself when attacked by some dogs owned by an Englishman. Enraged, Toru wrote: You see how cheap the life of an Indian is in the eyes of an English judge. She wrote to her friend about another case in which some soldiers had killed nine Bengalis, and wounded seven, and mentioned several other instances of brutality. Toru was against the extravagance of the people during the visit of the Prince of Wales, and critical of the grand fireworks displayed in his honor in the Calcutta Maidan. Remembering how 9000 was spent on fireworks when the Duke of Edinburgh came to India in 1869, she questioned, Was it not literally converting money to smoke? She disapproved pomp, extravagance, waste and feudal ways. Time was running short for Toru Dutt and the same disease that had taken her brother and sister attacked Toru, and she knew that she too had to yield to pitiless tyrant. Though she died at a very young age, she had left a deep mark in English literature. She is called the Keats of the Indo-English literature as she died at a very young age of consumption like him and for both of them the end came slow and sad. Had she lived longer her contribution to literature would have been never ending. Critics describe her as the fragile blossom that withered so fast. The well-known poet and novelist Andre Theuriet showered much praise on *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Field*. Her last poem *AMon Pere* is praised worldwide and is considered faultless. She was in a hurry to put in as much work as possible, to project and interpret India's past and glorious tradition to the English-speaking world. She was proud of her Indian tradition. She was proud of India's cultural heritage, folklores, myths and legends, and its rich classical literature. Though English by education, she was an Indian through and through. E.J. Thompson wrote about her, Toru Dutt remains one of the most astonishing woman that ever lived fiery and unconquerable of soul. These poems are sufficient to place Toru Dutt in the small class of women who have written English verse that can stand.

It was after Toru Dutt's death in 1877 that her father discovered the manuscripts of her writings, among which was ANCIENT BALLADS. He arranged to publish her works supplying the missing links-an act of homage of one poet to another while being a poignant testimony of fatherly love. Toru Dutt, a prodigy a comparison with Keats in tempting has been described as a PHENOMENON WITHOUT PARALLEL being so erudite in the literature of both the East and West. Fisher comments that this child of the green valley of the Ganges has by sheer force of native genius earned for herself the right to be enrolled in the great fellowship of English poets. What is most remarkable in one so young is the motive realisation that East and West are not two antithetical entities and a commingling was not only possible but also most fruitful for creative art. In this awareness, she can be regarded as one of the forerunners of the poetic renaissance in India. Though Toru Dutt loved English and French and had embraced Christianity with other members of her family, sub-consciously she felt drawn towards her country and its rich heritage. Her European education did not have the adverse effect of alienating her from her roots-on the other hand she returned to it with fresh insights. While Gosse sees her A SHEAF GLEANED IN FRENCH FIELDS as imperfect though interesting is his prediction that- her English poems will be ultimately found to constitute Toru's chief legacy of posterity-has come true. The ballads The Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan form the LAST AND MOST MATURED OF HER COUNTINGS. The ballads are essentially Indian in genre and outlook and are the poetical attempts to reveal her return to her land. In them are enshrined what she had learnt of her country from books and from her people. She did not anglicise her ideas but kept close to the ethical values of the original tales while her understanding of modern life and dedication to craft has helped her to make these ideas of yore relevant to posterity.

Christmas

The sky is dark, the snow descends:
Ring, bells, ring out your merriest chime!
Jesus is born; the Virgin bends
Above him. Oh, the happy time!
No curtains bright-festooned are hung,
To shield the Infant from the cold;
The spider-webs alone are slung
Upon the rafters bare and old.
On fresh straw lies the little One,
Not in a palace, but a farm,
And kindly oxen breathe upon
His manger-bed to keep it warm.
White wreaths of snow the roofs attire,
And o'er them stars the blue adorn,
And hark! In white the angel-quire
Sings to the Shepherds, 'Christ is born.'

Toru Dutt

Lakshman

'Hark! Lakshman! Hark, again that cry!
It is, - it is my husband's voice!
Oh hasten, to his succour fly,
No more hast thou, dear friend, a choice.
He calls on thee, perhaps his foes
Environ him on all sides round,
That wail, - it means death's final throes!
Why standest thou, as magic-bound?

'Is this a time for thought, - oh gird
Thy bright sword on, and take thy bow!
He heeds not, hears not any word,
Evil hangs over us, I know!
Swift in decision, prompt in deed,
Brave unto rashness, can this be,
The man to whom all looked at need?
Is it my brother that I see!

'Oh no, and I must run alone,
For further here I cannot stay;
Art thou transformed to blind dumb stone!
Wherefore this impious, strange delay!
That cry, - that cry, - it seems to ring
Still in my ears, - I cannot bear
Suspense; if help we fail to bring
His death at least we both can share'

'Oh calm thyself, Videhan Queen,
No cause is there for any fear,
Hast thou his prowess never seen?
Wipe off for shame that dastard tear!
What being of demonian birth
Could ever brave his mighty arm?
Is there a creature on earth
That dares to work our hero harm?

'The lion and the grisly bear
Cower when they see his royal look,
Sun-staring eagles of the air
His glance of anger cannot brook,
Pythons and cobras at his tread
To their most secret coverts glide,
Bowed to the dust each serpent head
Erect before in hooded pride.

'Rakshasas, Danavs, demons, ghosts,
Acknowledge in their hearts his might,
And slink to their remotest coasts,
In terror at his very sight.
Evil to him! Oh fear it not,
Whatever foes against him rise!
Banish for aye the foolish thought,
And be thyself, - bold, great, and wise.

'He call for help! Canst thou believe
He like a child would shriek for aid
Or pray for respite or reprieve -
Not of such metal is he made!
Delusive was that piercing cry, -
Some trick of magic by the foe;
He has a work, - he cannot die,
Beseech me not from hence to go.

For here beside thee, as a guard
'Twas he commanded me to stay,
And dangers with my life to ward
If they should come across thy way.
Send me not hence, for in this wood
Bands scattered of the giants lurk,
Who on their wrongs and vengeance brood,
And wait the hour their will to work.'

'Oh shame! and canst thou make my weal

A plea for lingering! Now I know
What thou art, Lakshman! And I feel
Far better were an open foe.
Art thou a coward? I have seen
Thy bearing in the battle-fray
Where flew the death-fraught arrows keen,
Else had I judged thee so today.

'But then thy leader stood beside!
Dazzles the cloud when shines the sun,
Reft of his radiance, see it glide
A shapeless mass of vapours dun;
So of thy courage, - or if not,
The matter is far darker dyed,
What makes thee loth to leave this spot?
Is there a motive thou wouldst hide?

'He perishes - well, let him die!
His wife henceforth shall be mine own!
Can that thought deep imbedded lie
Within thy heart's most secret zone!
Search well and see! one brother takes
His kingdom, - one would take his wife!
A fair partition! - But it makes
Me shudder, and abhor my life.

'Art thou in secret league with those
Who from his hope the kingdom rent?
A spy from his ignoble foes
To track him in his banishment?
And wouldst thou at his death rejoice?
I know thou wouldst, or sure ere now
When first thou heardst that well known voice
Thou shouldst have run to aid, I trow.

'Learn this, - whatever comes may come,
But I shall not survive my Love,
Of all my thoughts here is the sum!

Witness it gods in heaven above.
If fire can burn, or water drown,
I follow him: - choose what thou wilt
Truth with its everlasting crown,
Or falsehood, treachery, and guilt.

'Remain here with a vain pretence
Of shielding me from wrong and shame,
Or go and die in his defence
And leave behind a noble name.
Choose what thou wilt, - I urge no more,
My pathway lies before me clear,
I did not know thy mind before,
I know thee now, - and have no fear.'

She said and proudly from him turned, -
Was this the gentle Sita? No.
Flames from her eyes shot forth and burned,
The tears therein had ceased to flow.
'Hear me, O Queen, ere I depart,
No longer can I bear thy words,
They lacerate my inmost heart
And torture me, like poisoned swords.

'Have I deserved this at thine hand?
Of lifelong loyalty and truth
Is this the meed? I understand
Thy feelings, Sita, and in sooth
I blame thee not, - but thou mightst be
Less rash in judgement, Look! I go,
Little I care what comes to me
Wert thou but safe, - God keep thee so!

'In going hence I disregard
The plainest orders of my chief,
A deed for me, - a soldier, - hard
And deeply painful, but thy grief
And language, wild and wrong, allow

No other course. Mine be the crime,
And mine alone. - but oh, do thou
Think better of me from this time.

'Here with an arrow, lo, I trace
A magic circle ere I leave,
No evil thing within this space
May come to harm thee or to grieve.
Step not, for aught, across the line,
Whatever thou mayst see or hear,
So shalt thou balk the bad design
Of every enemy I fear.

'And now farewell! What thou hast said,
Though it has broken quite my heart,
So that I wish I were dead -
I would before, O Queen, we part,
Freely forgive, for well I know
That grief and fear have made thee wild,
We part as friends, - is it not so?'
And speaking thus he sadly smiled.

'And oh ye sylvan gods that dwell
Among these dim and sombre shades,
Whose voices in the breezes swell
And blend with noises of cascades,
Watch over Sita, whom alone
I leave, and keep her safe from harm,
Till we return unto our own,
I and my brother, arm in arm.

'For though ill omens round us rise
And frighten her dear heart, I feel
That he is safe. Beneath the skies
His equal is not, - and his heel
Shall tread all adversaries down,
Whoever they may chance to be.
Farewell, O Sita! Blessings crown

And peace for ever rest with thee!

He said, and straight his weapons took
His bow and arrows pointed keen,
Kind, - nay, indulgent, - was his look,
No trace of anger, there was seen,
Only a sorrow dark, that seemed
To deepen his resolve to dare
All dangers. Hoarse the vulture screamed,
As out he strode with dauntless air.

Toru Dutt

Love Came To Flora Asking For A Flower

Love came to Flora asking for a flower
That would of flowers be undisputed queen,
The lily and the rose, long, long had been
Rivals for that high honor. Bards of power
Had sung their claims. 'The rose can never tower
Like the pale lily with her Juno mien' -
'But is the lily lovelier?' Thus between
Flower-factions rang the strife in Psyche's bower.
'Give me a flower delicious as the rose
And stately as the lily in her pride' -
But of what color?' - 'Rose-red,' Love first chose,
Then prayed - 'No, lily-white - or, both provide;'
And Flora gave the lotus, 'rose-red' dyed,
And 'lily-white' - the queenliest flower that blows.

Toru Dutt

My Vocation

A waif on this earth,
Sick, ugly and small,
Contemned from my birth
And rejected by all,
From my lips broke
Where - oh where shall I fly?
Who comfort will bring?
Sing, - said God in reply,
Chant poor little thing.

Life struck me with fright -
Full of chances and pain,
So I hugged with delight
The drudge's hard chain;
One must eat, - yet I die,
Like a bird with clipped wing,
Sing - said God in reply,
Chant poor little thing.

Love cheered for a while
My morn with his ray,
But like a ripple or smile
My youth passed away.
Now near Beauty I sigh,
But fled is the spring!
Sing - said God in reply,
Chant poor little thing.

All men have a task,
And to sing is my lot -
No meed from men I ask
But one kindly thought.
My vocation is high -
'Mid the glasses that ring,
Still - still comes that reply,
Chant poor little thing.

Toru Dutt

Our Casuarina Tree

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. But gallantly
The giant wears the scarf, and flowers are hung
In crimson clusters all the boughs among,
Whereon all day are gathered bird and bee;
And oft at nights the garden overflows
With one sweet song that seems to have no close,
Sung darkling from our tree, while men repose.

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;
And to their pastures wend our sleepy cows;
And in the shadow, on the broad tank cast
By that hoar tree, so beautiful and vast,
The water-lilies spring, like snow enmassed.

But not because of its magnificence
Dear is the Casuarina to my soul:
Beneath it we have played; though years may roll,
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!
What is that dirge-like murmur that I hear
Like the sea breaking on a shingle-beach?
It is the tree's lament, an eerie speech,
That haply to the unknown land may reach.

Unknown, yet well-known to the eye of faith!
Ah, I have heard that wail far, far away
In distant lands, by many a sheltered bay,

When slumbered in his cave the water-wraith
And the waves gently kissed the classic shore
Of France or Italy, beneath the moon,
When earth lay tranced in a dreamless swoon:
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 I fain would consecrate a lay
Unto thy honor, Tree, beloved of those
Who now in blessed sleep for aye repose,—
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.

Toru Dutt

Sonnet

A sea of foliage girds our garden round,
But not a sea of dull unvaried green,
Sharp contrasts of all colors here are seen;
The light-green graceful tamarinds abound
Amid the mango clumps of green profound,
And palms arise, like pillars gray, between;
And o'er the quiet pools the seemuls lean,
Red-red, and startling like a trumpet's sound.
But nothing can be lovelier than the ranges
Of bamboos to the eastward, when the moon
Looks through their gaps, and the white lotus changes
Into a cup of silver. One might swoon
Drunken with beauty then, or gaze and gaze
On a primeval Eden, in amaze.

Toru Dutt

The Broken Bell

'Tis bitter-sweet on winter nights to note,
Beside the palpitating fire reclined,
The chimes, across the fogs, upon the wind.
Now loud, now low, now near and now remote.
What recollections on that music float!
Blessed the bell that through the darkness blind
Sends honest greetings, consolations kind.
And solemn warnings from its lusty throat
Tis like a wakeful soldier, - mine, alas!
The soul-bell in me, can but give one cry,
Like that, a wounded soldier - o'er whom pass
Riders and horses, and around whom lie
The dead and dying in a tangled mass -
Utters, unable or to move or die.

Toru Dutt

The Sower

Sitting in a porchway cool,
Sunlight, I see, dying fast,
Twilight hastens on to rule.
Working hours have well-nigh past.
Shadows run across the lands:
But a sower lingers still,
Old, in rags, he patient stands.
Looking on, I feel a thrill.
Black and high, his silhouette
Dominates the furrows deep!
Now to sow the task is set.
Soon shall come a time to reap.
Marches he along the plain
To and fro, and scatters wide
From his hands the precious grain;
Muse I, as I see him stride.
Darkness deepens. Fades the light.
Now his gestures to mine eyes
Are august; and strange, - his height
Seems to touch the starry skies

Toru Dutt

The Young Captive

The budding shoot ripens unharmed by the scythe,
Without fear of the press, on vine branches lithe,
Through spring-tide the green clusters bloom.
Is't strange, then, that I in my life's morning hour,

Though troubles like clouds on the dark present lower,
Half-frighted shrink back from my doom ?

Let the stern-hearted stoic run boldly on death!

I - I weep and I hope; to the north wind's chill breath

I bend, - then erect is my form!

If days there are bitter, there are days also sweet,
Enjoyment unmixed where on earth may we meet?

What ocean has never a storm?

Illusions the fairest assuage half my pain,

The walls of a prison enclose me in vain,

The strong wings of hope bear me far;

So escapes from the net of the fowler the bird,

So darts he through ether, while his music is heard

Like showers of sweet sound from a star.

Comes Death unto me? I sleep tranquil and calm.

And Peace when I waken stands by with her balm.

Remorse is the offspring of crimes;

My welcome each morning smiles forth in all eyes,

My presence is here, to sad brows, a surprise

Which kindles to pleasure at times.

The end of my journey seemed so far to my view;

Of the elm-trees which border the long avenue,

The nearest are only past by;

At the banquet of life I have barely sat down.

My lips have but pressed the bright foaming crown

Of the wine in my cup bubbling high.

I am only in spring, - the harvest I'd see,

From season to season like the sun I would be

Intent on completing my round;

Shining bright in the garden, - its honour and queen;

As yet but the beams of the morning I've seen,

I wait for eve's stillness profound.

O Death, thou canst wait; leave, leave me to dream,

And strike at the hearts where Despair is supreme,

And Shame hails thy dart as a boon!
For me, Pales has arbours unknown to the throngs,
The world has delights, the Muses have songs,
I wish not to perish too soon.
A prisoner myself, broken-hearted and crushed,
From my heart to my lips all my sympathies rushed,
And my lyre from its slumbers awoke;
At these sorrows, these wishes, of a captive, I heard,
And to rhyme and to measure I married each word
As softly and simply she spoke.
Should this song of my prison hereafter inspire
Some student with leisure her name to inquire,
This answer at least may be given, -
That grace marked her figure, her action, her speech,
And such as lived near her, blameless might teach
That life is the best gift of heaven

Note: Captive: Aimée de Coigny, duchess of Fleury.

Toru Dutt