

Hearts Laid Bare and Tears water(ed) Down: Autobiographical Elements in the Poetry of Toru Dutt & Kamala Das

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Abstract

The primary object of this paper is to explore the autobiographical elements in the poetic oeuvre of Toru Dutt and Kamala Das and to have a deeper look into the reflection of their "self" in their works. The paper also aims to draw a line of resemblance between these two seemingly unconnected poets in the light of suppressed femininity and the eternal urge of letting their voices be heard. A deep-delving study of the poetry of both of the poets, the paper tries to provide an insight into the psychological aspects of their perceptive mind and tries to find out whether they were propelled by the same impulse to break the somnolence and monotony of subjugation and disregard. The expected outcome of the paper is to get the crux of all those unheard voices that remained covered under sheer forgetfulness and negligence.

Keywords: autobiographical, reflection of the self, femininity, psychological aspects, subjugation, disregard, unheard voices.

"It is our inward journey that leads us through time- forward or back, seldom in a straight line, most often spiralling."

-Eudora Welty¹

In an interview, Annie Zaidi, the editor of *Unbound: 2,000 Years of Indian Women's Writing*, says that women do confront the "risk of incurring the displeasure of various social groups when they write their own truths and honest opinions of what women's lives are like. ...the degree of hostility a woman writer faces is usually in inverse proportion to the extent of women's personal

and social freedoms."² If one traces this issue back to the phenomenon of ancient India, one may find that despite having the equal status with men in all aspects of life, Gargis and Maitreyis were few, and, with their all-encompassing philosophical erudition, they were engaged in composing Vedic hymns, allowing themselves little to write something about their own lives. It was not until the late 19th and the early 20th century, after the long dark era of the Islamic reign of the Sultanate and the Mughal empire, that Indian women began to cherish the idea of letting their voices be free from the cocoon of complacent (and squalid) domesticity. From Rasasundari Devi, Pandita Ramabai, Parvati Athavale, and Suniti Devi to Chhaya Datar, Bharati Mukherjee, Ashapura Devi, and Shashi Deshpande- the journey goes on, exploring new horizons, accomplishing new knowledge. Toru Dutt and Kamala Das were two such exponents of the journey that is yet to be ended. The differences between the two are only of time, locale, and ways of expression; the literary creation of both is marked by a strong desire to vent the inmost feelings.

Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India* sees the Indian Renaissance as an amalgamation of Western knowledge and Indian traditional ideology: "She (India) looked to the West, and at the same time she looked at herself and her own past."³ This disposition can clearly be observed in the life and works of Toru Dutt, the first Indian woman to write poetry in the colonizer's language. The youngest Daughter of Govin Chunder Dutt and Kshetramani Dutt, Toru belonged to the eminent Dutt family of Renaissance Bengal. After the untimely death of Toru's elder brother Abju, the family moved to Europe in 1869 and stayed in France for four months, where Toru and her elder sister Aru, also a proficient poet and translator, were tutored in French. Before Aru's illness drove the family back to India, they spent some time in England where the girls attended some lectures for women at Cambridge. After Aru's death in 1874 Toru devoted herself fully to her literary works, completing the translation project *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876) that she and Aru had begun in London. The intense tragedy underlying her works lends profundity to the collection titled *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindusthan*, published posthumously in 1882. The silent tears of a bereaved sister, the nostalgic ruminations of the bygone years by a teenage girl permeate throughout the poem 'Our Casuarina Tree'; a poem that English critics regarded as "the most remarkable poem ever written in English by a foreigner."⁴

The image of the mighty tree and the "Python"-like creeper circling its "rugged trunk" bears the symbol of the inner strength and invincibility of the poet whose vibrant spirit could not be dampened by the fatal disease she was suffering from. The pictorial detail, with which she describes the "gray baboon" and its "puny offspring", the morning song of the "kokilas", and the "sleepy cows", adds to the mesmerizing beauty of both the tree and its surroundings. Suddenly a subtle change of tone is introduced with a saddening note of agony in the third stanza, much in the manner of Valmiki's *shoka* (sorrow) leading to the *shloka* (verse):

But not because of its magnificence

Dear is the Casuarina to my soul:

Beneath it we have played;

O sweet companions...

For your sakes, shall the tree be ever dear.

So strong is her affection for the painfully soothing memory attached with the tree and the "sweet companions" that she hardly missed the "dirge-like murmur", "the tree's lament" from her "own loved native clime" even when she was in some distant land. This "native clime", with all its greenery and leafy foliage, becomes alive in the sonnet 'Baugmaree'. It is an integration of East and West in which the exuberant local setting is captured with Keatsian sensuousness tinged with a Wordsworthian spiritual intensity⁵ that likens her family's Calcutta garden to the Biblical Garden of Eden. The garden, of which she often talks about in her letters to Mary Martin⁶, becomes vividly visible with the "(s)harp contrast of all colours": the "light-green graceful tamarinds", the mangoes, the palms "like pillars gray", "the seemuls...red, and startling like a trumpet's sound"(an example of synaesthesia), "the ranges Of bamboos" through which the moon peeps, "and the white lotus changes Into a cup of silver." The Dutt family was Hindu when Toru was born, but embraced Christianity after six years. It is speculated that Kshetramani, Toru's mother, may have been an unwilling participant in the conversion⁷. The 19th century orthodox Hindus treated such converted Christians with disgrace and thus leading them to the

psychological and emotional trauma of one being alienated from the rest of the society⁸. Partly provoked by this trauma and partly by her mother's influence, Toru took up ancient Hindu myths, attempting to carve out a space for herself in the Hindu society⁹. The poem 'Sita' is one of the products of such deep-delving into the mythological past. The heartrending story of the abandoned epic heroine is sewn in the tapestry of a recollective image of the gone childhood where the poet retrospectively visits the memory of her mother retelling the story of Sita from the Ramayana to the three siblings. "Poignant and powerful, the poem reveals the child's emotional response to Sita, but more generally, her imaginative rooting in the inherited tradition."¹⁰ However, Toru Dutt's strategic singularity is her undaunted mettle lying dormant under a submissive, docile nature. Her strong will and determination find eloquence in her portrayal of 'Savitri', the Vedic time *swyamvara*, whose freedom of movement and choice was perhaps secretly longed by the young poet. In a letter to Mary Martin, dated 24 March 1876, Toru complains: "The Bengali reunions are always for men. Wives and daughters and all women-kind are confined to the house, lock and key..."⁷. Perhaps that is why she composes her two novels, one in French (*Le Journal de Mademoiselle D'Arvers*) and the other in English (*Bianca*), in private and (as both are romances) making the women protagonists have choice in their lives, personal space and freedom in social intercourse- qualities that she herself had been deprived of despite being a member of the so-called liberal, Western educated family.

Kamala Das's *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) arrived at a time when English poetry by Indian women had begun to come out from the traditional themes of rewriting the legends, praise of the pastoral beauty, and general ethical issues to writing about personal experiences.¹¹ An acclaimed author in her mother tongue Malayalam, Kamala Das has published three books of verse in English: *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) preceded by the one already mentioned. Born in a family of poetic genius (her mother Balamani Amma and grand-uncle Nalapat Narayana Menon were distinguished poets in Malayalam), Kamala Das, having started writing poetry in an early age and having published them in *Indian PEN* (1948), flourished from an amateurish, inept poet to a deft practitioner of the confessional genre, wringing the poetic essence out of the mundane reality of her own everyday life. Bruce King

precisely presents a background of her literary oeuvre, culling the major incidents of her eventful life:

Her early poems are primarily concerned with her marriage, love life, desire for intimacy and the various results--including guilt--and her fame as a writer. There is a basic story which Kamala Das tells about herself in her poetry and autobiography, *My Story*. Raised in the warmth of a tight-knit Kerala matrilineal society, she was uprooted when her father moved to Calcutta. For a time she attended a Catholic boarding school and was suddenly at a young age married to a cousin for whom she apparently had little affection, while he was too preoccupied with his career to expect more from his young wife than a cook and sexual partner. Left by herself as she and her husband moved home in accordance with his job, rebellious, angry and confused, Das turned to others for affection. Her husband's willingness to let her have her sexual experiences was a further blow to her ego. What he saw as freedom for a writer she saw as a lack of caring.¹¹

The confessional mode in Kamala Das becomes a device to elucidate the process of analysis and adjustment of the problems that crop up from arranged marriage at an early age. This tone reverberates around the poem 'The Stone Age' in which the "Fond husband" is seen as an "Old fat spider" weaving "webs of bewilderment" around the woman and turning her into "a bird of stone, a granite Dove". The image of the bird is deftly chosen to portray the utter helplessness of the woman's soul writhing in the bondage of domestic life, yearning for freedom:

I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea,
Love-words flung from doorways and of course
Your tired lust. ('I Shall Some Day')

Bereft of love, devoid of the warmth and feeling she longs for from her husband, the wife keeps falling for other men, hopelessly groping for her Prince Charming, only to realise the brevity and stupidity of the thing called love:

...love became a swivel-door,

When one went out, another came in. ('Substitute')

Kamala Das's experience of isolation, instead of being internalised, becomes part of every woman's experience in its macrocosmic implication in the concluding lines of the poem 'An Introduction':

I have no joys which are not yours, no

Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

This could clearly be seen in the poem 'The Looking Glass' in which the poet exhorts the women to be cautious in matters of love:

...getting

A man to love is easy, but living

Without him afterwards may have to be

Faced.

The graphic detailing of the fleshly pleasures and the free and frank erotic lyricism might sometimes be shocking but it enables the poet to image the amorous relationships between every man and every woman in all their inner ugliness and spiritual sterility, as she says elsewhere:

This skin-communicated

Thing that I dare not yet in

His presence call our love. ('In Love')

Still, the woman tries to find solace by indulging again and again in such affairs:

My body's wisdom tells and tells again

That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace

And even death nowhere else but here in

My betrayer's arms.... ('A Relationship')

Hélène Cixous propounds the notion of female writing practice in the theory of *écriture féminine*, arguing in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' that "by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her."¹² Kamala Das's writing conforms to this notion. Her dissatisfaction with her life in turn sharpened her consciousness and she decided to express her grievances through the poetic medium. "I believe we write to transform our suffering into words, trying to make something out of the madness" says Eve Ensler in an interview¹³. What she can talk about in the 21st century Kamala Das dared think of it almost half a century ago. And that is why it would be unfair to relegate such a poet like her to a narrow space of confessional literature, ignoring the significant dimensions that call for special consideration because of her unique place among the women poets of India. The anticipation of self-knowledge begins an autobiographical work and it ends with the making of a fiction that hides the promises of its development, disclosing the improbability of its own dream. Man, by reconstructing the ego as a defence against disintegration, applies a unity and identity across time, rejecting the effects of having internalised the isolating world order. Woman, more aware of her 'otherness', cannot experience herself as an entirely unique identity, and thus develops a dual consciousness, as Sheila Rowbotham says: "...always we are split in two."¹⁴ In W.E.B. Du Bois' terms, "it is a sense of looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."¹⁵ Toru Dutt, despite the time she belonged and her conservative family background, was capable of looking at herself through her own eyes and, perhaps, because of this independent spirit, she was favoured less by her father, in comparison with her meek and genteel elder sister Aru.¹⁶ This "Puny and elf-like", "self-willed and shy"¹⁶ girl knew that she was in exile in her own land. Edmund Gosse describes her as "the

pure Hindu full of the typical qualities of her race and blood"¹⁷ while Premendra Mitra saw her as the "foremost among those who drank (the) nectar of western culture...."¹⁸ But her lonely heart knew how much she had been alienated from both of them. Chandani Lokugé sees her as "one of the earliest illustrations of globalisation that Bhabha defines as the "inter"...the in-between space...."¹⁹ As many a flower is born to blush unseen, likewise this "pure, sweet, modest, and essentially lovable" "woman-child"²⁰ is almost a forgotten bloom save for historical interest today. Kamala Das, her literary descendant, too, possessed the ability to see herself with her own vision but, was severely blindfolded and instructed to follow the rules shaped by her family and kinsmen -- more or less like her unsung predecessor. An oppressive and intense sense of loneliness and insecurity, caused by the little affection from workaholic father and "vague and indifferent"²¹ mother, the constant shifting of home, and the experience of discrimination as a dark girl at school, kept haunting her even in her adulthood. The poetic background of her family, as K. Satchidanandan thinks, "must have been too overpowering to let her feel proud about her writing. Her poems only made her weep."²² The sad solitude and the desperate longing for love grew even more after her marriage to an equally indifferent man. Her writing could not give her the cherished serenity; she was aware of her unconventionality and the consequent infamy. In her later years she turned to spirituality, even to changing her religion, only to find peace and to rest her tired and exhausted soul. Though she is now discussed on and off, her generation marked her as an attention-grabber iconoclast. She speaks for many such native sisters like herself and her predecessor whose voices are at best hushed courtesy of our society's venerable male vanities, without any stir. Both Toru Dutt and Kamala Das's contributions have more than historical importance, for, unfortunately, their particular battle has not altogether been won.

Notes & References

1. In *Journey Inward: Women's Autobiography*
2. Interview by Vivek Tejuja, June 15, 2015 in Scroll.in
3. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, page 330-1

4. E.J. Thomas, quoted by Saptarshi Mallick in his essay on Toru Dutt in the Chapter 3 of *Indian Poetry in English: Critical Essays*, edited by Zinia Mitra
5. Chandani Lokugé, introduction to *TORU DUTT: Collected Prose & Poetry*, page xxvii
6. Mary Martin was Toru's lifelong friend whom she met at Cambridge. In a letter dated 13 May 1876 written to Mary, Toru says: "...the Garden, dear old Baugmaree, is free from every grievance, so quiet and peaceful ..."
7. G.J.V. Prasad, Introduction to *The Diary of Mademoiselle D'Arvers*, the English translation of the original French novel by Toru Dutt, page xii
8. Reverend Lal Behari Day notes "...for even to touch a Christian would by an orthodox Hindu be reckoned as abomination." Quoted by Gerardine Macpherson in *Life of Lal Behari Day: Convert, Pastor, and Professor, and Author*, page 67. Chandani Lokugé observes: "Nor were they accepted socially among the British in India who were, Toru writes, 'generally supercilious and look[ed] down on Bengalis'." (*Introduction to TORU DUTT: Collected Prose & Poetry*, page xvi-xvii)
9. Deb Dulal Halder, "In Search of a Literary and Cultural Space: Toru Dutt's (De)colonised Sensibility", Chapter 5 in *Indian Poetry in English: Critical Essays*
10. Chandani Lokugé, *Introduction to TORU DUTT: Collected Prose & Poetry*, page xvi
11. Bruce King, Chapter 9, *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, page 147
12. Sarah Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, page 230
13. The Times of India, 23 June 2013
14. From *Threads through Time: Writings on History and Autobiography*. Quoted by K. Satchidanandan in the introduction to Kamala Das's *My Story*, page xi
15. K. Satchidanandan, page xi-xii
16. Govin Chunder Dutt, in one of his sonnets describes her three children in which there is a reflection of the complexity of Toru's character:

...And last of all,

Puny and elf-like, with dishevelled tresses,

Self-willed and shy, never heeding that I call,

Intent to pay her tenderest addresses

To bird or cat, - but most intelligent...

17. Quoted by Chandani Lokugé, page xxxviii
18. Quoted by Prithwindranath Mukherjee, "Flashes on Toru Dutt" in *TORU Dutt: Collected Prose & Poetry*, page 354
19. *TORU Dutt: Collected Prose & Poetry*, page xlvi
20. Harihar Das. Quoted by Chandani Lokugé in the introduction to *TORU DUTT: Collected Prose & Poetry*, page xxxix
21. Quoted from *My Story* by K. Satchidanandan in the introduction to *My Story*, page xii
22. Introduction to *My Story*, page xiii

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