

Representation of Nature in Indian English Poetry: Re-reading Toru Dutt's poem *Our Casuarina Tree* through the lens of Ecocriticism

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Abstract

The term "ecology" is derived from the word "oikos" which means household. Literature down the ages has depicted not only the beauty of nature but also awareness of the authors about environmental disaster. In India, since the Vedic civilization, nature has been portrayed as embodiment of Gods and Goddesses. Nature and its representation in cultural texts give rise to a new field of literary study called Ecocriticism. But the term is not as simple as it suggests. Alongside spreading awareness of preservation, it also deals with the material background and politics of 'constructing' nature rooted in the developmental framework of capitalism. Constructing 'nature' in the discourse of 'culture', the term is both natural and cultural. The term also associates with environmental activism and other social sciences. Indian poets, who have used nature as creative and thematic elements, include Toru Dutt, Keki N. Daruwalla, Sarojini Naidu, A.K. Ramanujan, Dilip Chitre. The present paper seeks to explore how Toru Dutt in her poem entitled *Our Casuarina Tree* showcases ecocritical perspectives by representing nature-human relationship and the importance of nature for the survival of other lives.

Key Words: Casuarina Tree, Ecocriticism, memory, Nature

The term Ecocriticism was possibly first coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. He defined it as 'the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature' (xviii). Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm included Rueckert's essay in their edition *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). It has become an outstanding landmark in the emergence of the theory of ecocriticism. Glotfelty defined Ecocriticism as "...the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Lawrence Buell's definition of 'ecocriticism' is that it is a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit

of commitment to environmentalist praxis. Summing up Toru Dutt's poetic powers Sri Aurobindo remarks: "She was an accomplished verse builder with a delicate talent and some outbreaks of genius, and she wrote things that were attractive, and sometimes she had a strong energy of language and a rhythmic force" (446).

In order to commemorate a tree that testifies to Toru Dutt's childhood days filled with joy, the poem sets and ends with a melancholic mood. Instead of naming the poem as *Casuarina Tree*, the poet sets the title as *Our Casuarina Tree* which implicates the approach of subjectivity and deep association with the tree. One of the most influential environmental philosophies, Deep ecology, promotes the idea of giving equal importance to all living beings in constructing modern societies. This philosophy argues that we should shift from human-centric or anthropocentric activities to eco-centric or bio-centric activities. Toru Dutt, like the philosophy of Deep ecology, hinges on eco-centric explanations in this poetry.

Divided into six stanzas, the poem begins with the suggestion of the tree's power of endurance. Clusters of creepers wrap around the rough tree trunk so tightly that no other trees except the Casuarina could bear the suffocating weight of these plants. Just as Python, a large non-poisonous snake coils around its prey to death, creepers have the potential to cover trees in such a profusion that they could hardly survive. The tree is so colossal that creepers climbing up to its topmost height seem to touch the stars. For the gigantic Casuarina tree, creepers are like a scarf, a piece of cloth for decorations and, red flowers in thick clumps are hanging all over the branches which are frequently visited by the birds and bees. The garden at night awakens to the melodious note of an unknown bird sitting on the tree whose song seems to have no ending. It reminds us of Wordsworth's solitary reaper who leads the valley to be overflowed with her melancholic song. The phrase "Sung darkling from our tree" is reminiscent of Stanza VII of Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* where the poet listens to the song of Nightingale in darkness many times (Dutt, 137).

The second stanza gives a vivid picture of dawn. When at dawn she opens the window, her eyes get delighted to rest on the tree. She sees that a short-tailed monkey sitting on the top of the tree is watching the sunrise while its young ones are playing on the lower branches of the tree. And the daybreak is greeted with songs by the 'Kokilas'. The use of the Bengali word 'kokilas' which in English means she-cuckoo, highlights the poet's deep connection with the Bengali language. The sleepy cows move slowly to the grassy land for grazing. By the tree, there is a large pool of water which is getting beautified by the water-lilies floating on the surface. The lilies are so white and pure that they look like white snow amassed on water. Here, the poet underlines that the tree acts as a haven for so many living creatures which is indicative of a sense of safety, security and undisturbed existence for the birds and animals.

In the third stanza, Toru Dutt shifts from the objective description of the tree and the dependence of other lives on it to her personal connection with it. The tree is dear to her not because of its

splendid state but because of its association with her lovable companions of childhood with whom she shared warmth of love, laughter and camaraderie. These "sweet companions" are perhaps indicative of elder sister Aru and elder brother Abju who died earlier. They used to play under the tree. In other words, the tree was the silent observer of their childhood activities. Their "images" remind her of the Casuarina tree that results in tears falling down her cheeks. The word "images" suggests that her friends are no longer alive. Though she is in foreign land, she can hear a funeral song which she compares to the sound produced by the waves of the sea falling on pebbles-filled beach. She can identify the sound - the sound produced by the branches of tree which she imagines to be its lamentation over the loss of her "sweet companions". Not only the poet but the tree grieves for her dead friends; its speech is strange, mysterious and frightening. She wonders how the tree's lament reaches the distant land which is foreign to her. Here, Toru Dutt adds mystique dimension to the tree.

Extending the mystique quality of the tree further, she begins the following stanza oxymoronically. The foreign lands though unknown become known to the tree by virtue of "the eye of faith" (ibid 138). The phrase "the eye of faith" is contrasted with "the naked eye". The naked eye is based on rationality, sensory experience of the external world whereas the eye of faith connotes a sheer sense of spiritual realm. And she has heard its sound several times at several foreign places. She has heard its sound when the water-ghost fell into a deep slumber in under water cave, when the sea waves touched the shore France or Italy as mentioned in classical literature, and when the earth fell asleep under the moon. And every time, its sound reminds her of the shape of the tree whom she saw in her childhood in her own country. This underscores her love for the tree as well for her country.

In the final stanza, she states that she will dedicate a poem in honour of the tree which was loved by those who are now in eternal sleep, those who were dearer to her than her own life. After her death, through the poetry, the tree will be remembered and counted among those gigantic trees found in Borrowdale, a tourist place as well as a health resort. It refers to the four ancient yew trees in Borrowdale that are immortalised by Wordsworth through his poetry *Yew Trees*. Under these trees, the ailing people stay for a period longer than usual with the hope of recovery and fear of leaving the world early. Though the poem composed in honour of the tree may have shortcomings, it will celebrate the beauty of the tree. And her unwavering love for the tree will save it from the curse of being oblivious.

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