

## The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

[www.thecreativelaucher.com](http://www.thecreativelaucher.com)

### Culture and Civilization in Toru Dutt's *Ancient Ballads of Hindustan*

**Dr. Piyushbala**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English  
DSPMU, Ranchi, India

**DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2019.4.5.11**

#### Abstract

Toru Dutt was a poet, novelist, essayist, translator and polyglot. She was an outstanding pioneer in the history of Indian literature. In the sphere of Indo-English poetry the era of Renaissance may be termed as the 'Age of Dutt's' because the age was dominated by the two sisters Toru and Aru and renowned poetical man Romesh Chandra Dutt. Toru Dutt originated in a tradition in poetry which had to go, wait till Sri Aurobindo for a mature handling. She gave something fresh in English language. It was with her that Indian English Poetry really shifted from artificialness to genuineness. Toru's poetry indicates strongly her sense of roots, the beginning of her exploration and expression of her commitment to her Indian self and cultural environment. Toru Dutt placed her country on world literary map brought fame on international map of letters. It is very clear that Toru inherited rich intellectual and moral treasures from her parents and country.

**Keywords** - Indianness, Classicism, Legends, Idealism, Religion

#### Introduction

Toru Dutt is an outstanding name in Indo- Anglian poetry. Bengali writer Toru Dutt is often considered to be the first Indian poetess to write in French and English. She started writing at the time when Indian writers were facing lot of criticism from English British writers. Dutt's work was not only appreciated but even republished. Although she died at the tender age of 21, Dutt's achievements are significant even today. She like Keats blossomed early and died premature. She had both the best and the worst in her life. Her life was a mixture of sunshine and sorrow, beauty and tragedy, success and regret. Throughout the work of Toru there are two contrasts in feeling or thought, i.e. ecstasy and wonder in her works and sad and repenting of her early death. Toru Dutt exhibited great capability and originality to elevate Indian English Poetry to the height of poetic excellence. She established worthy traditions in the nascent tradition of Indian English Poetry and created the Path for Tagore, Sarojini Naidu and Aurobindo. Her predecessors were merely explorers of English traditions in Indian English Poetry. She was

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

[www.thecreativelaucher.com](http://www.thecreativelaucher.com)

declared by Dunn as the founder of modern school of English poetry. She composed poetry which showed profundity of feelings, sensitiveness to nature, colour and flowers, narrative art, vivid characterization and refined technique. She also exposed to the west the soul of India through poetry. While in Europe, Toru and her sister Aru learned French and later tried their hands in Sanskrit language. Aru and Toru have made a great deal of contribution in Indo-Anglian Literature in a short period of time. It is meager, but it is of lasting worth. Her early works were essays, which first came into observation in December 1874 in *The Bengal Magazine*.

Toru Dutt is the first Indian poetess, who reveals to west the soul of India through the poetry by narrating stories sung in a divine form, thousands of years ago. It creates the real Indian atmosphere. Toru's Indianness lies in Classical India, instead of nineteenth century or modern India. Her poems are based on original Indian themes and culture, and occupy a conspicuous place in the Indian English poetry. The best example of the poems is *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. It is a literary piece of Indian classical tradition. The whole theme is derived from Sanskrit classical language of India, to which many of its modern vernaculars owe their derivation. The whole story is taken from *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and *Vishnu Purana*. These classics exemplify the premier ethics of culture and civilization in ancient India. Toru's work is directly based on Indian classics and in this way Toru has served the motherland. C. F. Andrews justifies Toru saying:

Just as Greek and Roman poetry have become the classics of Christian Europe, and have not been put under a ban because of pagan mythology is mingled with them, so the ancient Sanskrit literature of India will remain the classic of the land, and its story will be cherished in future ages by Christian. To Toru Dutt such an assimilation of the best of life of India to Christianity came as natural instinct. Her passionate love for the tradition of her country inherited from her mother in no way militated against her Christianity faith. (221)

C. D. Narasimhaiah writes, "Shows at once her knowledge of Sanskrit and the tradition it nourished, not to speak of the folk culture which had also received its nourishment from Sanskrit" (30). The whole work is based on Toru's own understanding, imagination and visualization of the Indians. T. O. Dunn writes, "For the first time, in Literature of this kind, there is struck a genuinely Indian note, and through a medium of a perfect English expression, there is conveyed something of sincerity of mind proud of the intellectual traditions of its native land" (22).

## Ballads and Legends

*The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, *The Vishnu Purana*, and *The Bhagavat* gave her imagination a free play and thus she was able to present the stories of great men and women, immortal heroes and heroines. She paid same tribute to Hindu epic and myth as the Greek had done for Homeric. She had an appeal and obsession to the deep magic of Hinduism.

## The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

[www.thecreativelaucher.com](http://www.thecreativelaucher.com)

Toru's chief legacy to posterity is found in her Ballads and Legends from Sanskrit under the title, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. The "Ballads" was first published in London in 1882 with an *Introductory Memoir* by Edmund Gosse. It contains English composition from her translation of Sanskrit literature. She had left this collection in bits and fragments, but after her death, the nine Ballads and Legends were collected and brought for publication, by her father. Toru was so thrilled and moved by the tales that she was unresistably tempted to adopt them for writing in a language she had adopted. *Ancient Ballads and Legends* is classified in two parts. The first part encompasses poems of ancient hero and heroine and the subsequent one comprises seven miscellaneous poems. The Ballads emphasizes Toru's marvelous proficiency in narrative verse. If she had lived long she would have accomplished a distinct place in Indian English literature. Her technique of story-telling is quite appealing; it is full of interest and curiosity. It has a good beginning, middle and end. The readers are attracted to the work from beginning to the end, with great enthusiasm and zeal. As Dr. Jha writes, "She has a rare gift of story-telling, of arousing interest and curiosity, of creative suspense, and of drawing characters. But perhaps in descriptive poetry she is even superior" (30). Her 'Ballads' are stronger and powerful in her spontaneous outbursts of songs, particularly when she came in close touch with a mystic contact with the unknown. She delves deep into the understanding of Hindu links between the sons and the daughters of the worlds and the Gods. The first Ballad "Savitri" is the longest. It is based on *Mahabharata* in the third book and this story has been retold through the ages. It is based on the theme of love and death. It has Indian Vedantic philosophy, which reveals Hindu vies of life. It is written in five parts. In the first part we get to know about Savitri's birth and parentage, her grace, love for Satyavan, and her parents and Narad's approval of marriage, Savitri pleading her case, revealed in strong words;

Unwedded to my dying day  
I must, my father dear, remain:  
Tis well if so thou will'st but say  
Can man blk fate, or break its chain? (Dutt, 11)

In the second part we come across the marriage of Savitri, her devotion to gods and goddesses and moving into the forest, where Satyavan comes across death. The fourth is the important part where Satyavan dies and the conversation of Savitri with Yama to get her love back. The discussion is a philosophical one:

I know in such a world as this  
No one can gain his heart's desire,  
Or pass the years in perfect bliss;  
Like gold we must be tried by fire. (Dutt, 31)

## The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

[www.thecreativelaucher.com](http://www.thecreativelaucher.com)

Savitri is presented, a figure with indomitable courage and resolutions, resolved to get over death by her love, by means of speeches. There is persuasive logic in the ornamented words of Savitri, which reveals Toru's artistry over speech and style:

No weariness, O Death, I feel.  
And how should I, when by the side  
Of Satyavan? In woe and weal  
To be a helpmate swears the bride,  
This is my place; by solemn oath  
Wherever thou conductest him  
I too must go, to keep my troth; (Dutt, 33)

Toru abounds with mystic sentiments. Death brings no sense of martyrdom, only a rebirth in the realm of the *light of life, shines in the darkness*. She handles her account of the conversation between Yama and Savitri so skillfully that Savitri convincing Yama by her words seems to be the victory of love over death. Savitri remains pervasive and steadfast. The fifth deals with Satyavan regaining his life. Yama's blessings come true in the course of time. Savitri, has become an immortal figure among the Hindus, a dear name taken with respect at every Hindu marriage. She has become a proverbial reference for devoted Hindu wife, 'faithful as Savitri':

As for Savitri, to this day  
Her name is named, when couples wed,  
But to the bride the parents say,  
Be thou like her, in heart and head. (Dutt, 45)

C. Paul Verghese remarks,

Toru Dutt seems to have handled the story with successfully following a technique of exclusion, condensation and abridgement. The characters speak for themselves and we know them directly. By a careful selection of scenes, and an emphasis on dialogue the reader is given the impression of speech, excitement and nearness to the action. (32)

Idealism has been given an important place in '*Ancient Ballads*'. Every character is a role model in its own field of relationship, they are ideal, obedient, sacrificing, dutiful and full of humanism. Every character is an ideal Hindu, the glory in faithful service. Lakshmana, an ideal brother loves Rama deeply and from his heart. The whole poem is in the form of a dialogue between Sita, Rama's ideal wife and Lakshmana, where Lakshmana is forced to leave Sita alone in the forest by the ruthless and lashing words of Sita, and goes in search of Rama, because Sita thought of him to be at risk and distress. But Lakshmana was not willing to leave her. He first convinces her, but later leaves with a word of warning not to cross the line. The poem has a good exultation or an outcry in the words of Sita. The poem begins with such exclamation. The whole poem has an exclamatory note.

Hark! Lakshman! Hark again the cry!

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

[www.thecreativelaucher.com](http://www.thecreativelaucher.com)

It is, - it is my Husband's voice! (Dutt, 46)

Difficult words spoken by Lakshmana;

In going hence I disregard

The plainest orders of my chief,

A deed for me, - a soldier, -hard

And deeply painful. (Dutt, 51)

Toru has tried to draw an accurate picture of an ideal brother and an ideal wife, both faithful and loyal towards their own duties and ideal in their own relation. The next poem '*Jogadhya Uma*' is based on folk legend. It is considered the most original work, with delicacy of feelings and the narration is relatively evident enough. It is the story of the Goddess Uma appearing to a Pedlar. The poem opens with a description of a Pedlar trampling along the road to Khiragram in the early morning, when dew still lay heavy on meadows and trees, and crying:

Shall- bracelets ho!shall bracelets ho:

Fair maids and matrons come and buy. (Dutt, 54)

The poem presents quite a contradiction in that Goddess Uma appears to a simple poor pedllar, instead of to a ritualistic priest. Simplicity has been placed over blind worship. Ballad survives with originality, giving marvellous finish. Toru's own comments about the story are seen in the closing lines of the poem:

Absurd may be the tale I tell,

Ill-suited to the marching times,

I loved the lips from which it fell,

So let it stand among my rhymes, (Dutt, 64)

Toru's Ballad 'Buttoo' recounts the story of a compliant pupil. It is a ballad from *Mahabharata*. She made an effort to highlight the gulf between the upper and the lower caste. The lower castes despite their talent are denied their right, because of their birth. It is the liveliest picture, on the caste theme. Buttoo has been characterized as a man of *bravery, honesty, with qualities of gallants*, this is the common features that we find in ancient Indian heroes. At one command from his Guru he offered his right thumb.

Glanced the sharp knife one moment high,

The severed thumb was on the sad,

There was no tear in Buttoo's eye,

He left the matter with his God. (Dutt, 88)

Buttoo stands for an ideal disciple and an example for modern disciples. One cannot be prevented, seeing the courage and loyalty of Buttoo brought out by Toru Dutt, with full profound modernity and sense of admiration. Buttoo touched the mind of Drona by his superhuman conduct and unflinching adherence and got the blessing:

Fame shall sound thy praise from sea to sea,

## The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

[www.thecreativelaucher.com](http://www.thecreativelaucher.com)

And men shall ever link thy name  
With self-help, Truth and Modesty. (Dutt, 88)

After the Ballad of ideal pupil, we come to read about an ideal son 'Sindhu'. Sindhu was the only son of blind parents, who spent his entire life in their service. But unfortunately one-day king Dasrath on his hunting killed Sindhu. But Sindhu, knew that it was a punishment for a sin Sindhu had committed by killing a pair of doves resting on a peepel tree. She writes, "Blood calls for red blood still." (Dutt, 99)

But Dasrath served Sindhu's old parents, but received a curse that he would suffer the loss of their son.

Die- for a son's untimely loss!  
Die- with a broken heart! (Dutt, 105)

And the prophecy came true. The whole poem reveals the agony of death. Each and every attitude has expression of the noblest in each and every character, whether a son Sindhu or a king Dasrath. The whole atmosphere in the poem reveals a message of duty and virtue and the narration is sustained throughout with pathos and austerity, commanded by emotive and dignified subject matter. Edmund Gosse remarks for Toru's *Ancient Ballads*, stands right when he says, "It is a wonderful mixture of strength and weakness of genius over-riding great obstacles and of talent succumbing to ignorance and inexperience at all in so extraordinary that we forget to be surprised at its inequality" (Gosse, xv). The poem 'Royal Ascetics and the Hind' narrates the matchless ascetics of Bharat, the great hermit king of Saligram. In this poem Toru has tried to project that love is superior to everything even God. Love is the way to attainment of God, which she has justified in the lines;

Not in seclusion, not apart from all,  
Not in a place elected for its peace,  
But in the heart and bustle of the world,  
Mid sorrow, sickness, suffering and sin,  
Must he still labours with a loving soul,  
Who serves to enter through the narrow gate. (Dutt, 70)

One who thinks that love is a hindrance to the attainment of God is passing through a narrow gate as one's outlook is then restricted and self-willed. Love gets the upper hand over rigorous asceticism, as expressed in the poem. The story is taken from '*Vishnu Purana*', Book II, and Chap. Xiii. '*The Legend of Dhruva*' is a Ballad of a prince who did not receive fatherly love and in reaction left the kingdom to attain God, the king of kings and practiced penances and austerities and earned immortality in the end. We recognize him as a star i.e. '*Dhruva Tara*', shining at night, shedding light in darkness. The poem gives the moral that one should not get disappointed but go on working hard to get success. It also shows that God is the supreme authority, if he is pleased then nothing is beyond reach. Toru has laid out this theme of God's blessings for his devoted children,

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

[www.thecreativelaucher.com](http://www.thecreativelaucher.com)

By prayer and penance Dhruva going at last

The highest heaven, and there he shines a star!

Nightly men see him in the firmament. (Dutt, 76)

The same theme of God's devotion by his children has been presented in the poem, 'Prahlad'. Prahlad is an ideal devotee of God, who has unyielding faith in God and his omnipotence and omnipresence. The poem gives the moral of victory of good over evil; which is found in day-to-day life. However much the evil may rise but at last comes to dust by the hands of good. Toru has projected the reality of life in quite an artistic manner relating the story of ancient days in modern ways. It so happens in the poem that God finally kills the proud king in the appearance of sable warrior half man – half lion. It is through the poetic talent that Toru has made herself a niche in the immortals of English poetry. In the Ballads and Legends of Hindustan, Toru has effectively interpreted the spirit of the east to the west. It contains the tales of Hindu mythology with philosophical compassion and passion. The character has force and vigour. There is an optimistic colour, because of the originality in presentation and contemplation of Toru. The poems are Indian with a modern touch. She has offered the things as they are, just done not to mystify India; she had faith in Indian tradition, which made her to write what in point of fact subsisted rather remodelling it.

The last of the nine Ballads is 'Sita', the wife of Lord Rama, discarded from his life on the comment of a washer man; about the chastity of Sita, for the days spent in Lanka. Sita in the abandoned condition stays in Rishi Valmiki's ashram with her two children. Sita is the picture of the ideal woman. She is the perfect epitome of temperance and innocence.

*Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* was written by Toru, who visited foreign lands, who draws deep at their foundations of culture and song, with a period of intellectual exercise, devoted to the interpretation of the spirit and civilization of her country, leaving behind movements of poetic genius that have won the approbation of competent critics and students of literature. It shows that poetry is in the blood of Toru. The best achievement reflected in the poetry of Ancient Ballads is the modern turn given to the legends. It makes it more attractive and is of greater appeal to the present day readers. Many critics judge '*Ancient Ballads*', as one of the best works in English. It is a good example of Toru's intellect, after completely assimilating the spirit of French and English literature, ultimately found proper expression in Sanskrit literature. It evolved the intense sensitiveness present in Toru. It shows how Toru's intellect found in due courses its truest expression in Sanskrit literature. It was the evolution of mind, of the intensely sensitive Indian poetess.

## Works Cited

- Andrews, C. F. Andrews, C. F., *The Renaissance in India: Its Missionary Aspect*, 1912,  
Narasimhaiah, C. D., *Swan and the Eagle*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study", 1969.  
Dunn, T. O. D., "Bengla Writers of English Verse", Longman, Green & Co. 1918.

## **The Creative Launcher**

**An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English**

[www.thecreativelaucher.com](http://www.thecreativelaucher.com)

Jha, Amarnath, *Introductory Memoir, Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. Kitabistan, 1941.

Dutt, Toru. *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. Kegan Paul & Co., 1882.

Verghese, C. Paul. *Problems of Indian creative writer in English*. Somaiya Publication, 1971.

Gosse, Edmund, *Introductory Memoir, Ancients Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. Kegan Paul & Co. 1885.