

ALIENATION, ISOLATION AND PESSIMISTIC SENSIBILITY IN TORU DUTT'S POETRY: A BRIEF STUDY

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Abstract:

Indian poets in English, like their counterparts in creative writing, perceive a plurality of identity emerging from the duality of cultures—a co presence of the twain—the inherited and the acquired traditions, form an essential part of the experience of indo- Anglican poets. The acceptance of English as a language for creative configuration is an involvement in depth and it exposes the writers to the cultural burdens behind it. The experience of biculturalism has filtered into the lives of all those who have been colonized directly or by a remote control. Indian culture, unlike any other culture is receptive not reactive. The Indian who uses the English language feels to some extent, alienated. It is not surprising, therefore, that writers in English are conscious of their Indian ness because, at the bottom of it all, one suspects a crisis of identity. The crisis of identity creates a feeling of isolation and alienation in the mind of a poet. The same was the case with Toru Dutt. This paper ensues to study the Alienation, Isolation and Pessimism in Toru Dutt's select poetry.

Keywords: Indian Poems, Culture, Alienation, Isolation, Pessimism etc.

The history of Indian poetry in English reveals a reasonable reticence over racism but it has constantly shown an accented allegiance to the indigenous culture. Toru Dutt is an outstanding figure in the history of indo-Anglican poetry. She had to live in her earlier years as a spiritual exile in India and later as a real one abroad, due to her conversion of faith from Hinduism to Christianity. Alienation has significantly affected the Indo-English literature. The problem of alienation is intimately related to the loss of and quest for one's identity. Donald Oken rightly, suggests that it is the loss of identity that results in alienation. The identity of the individual and that of his nation are inextricably entwined. Toru Dutt's choice is the result of her urgent need to overcome the crisis of identity caused by her sudden exposure to the western culture, literature, and religion at an

impressionable age. Apparently, she is not the only poet to turn to India's historical and legendary past. The young girl faced the dilemma of triple alienation in her own motherland viz., spiritual, social, and intellectual alienation. Her religious alienation was the outcome of her being a Christian convert. Toru was born and brought up in a Hindu family, which later converted to Christianity and that Toru remained a faithful Christian throughout her life. Her family's conversion to Christianity also led to her social alienation. She felt herself estranged from other communities of Bengal because of her denial to live by conservative ideals of feminism of 19th century's Bengal.

Toru's early years in India were years of rupture between the family and conventional Hindu community. The large Dutt family was itself divided and an insurmountable barrier separated the main body and the Christian division. She wishes that her grandmother had become a Christian but 'she is so much better than many who profess to be Christians'. Anybody can understand her mental state, which has suffered such isolation.

It is time to take Toru's work one by one in the light of the theme of isolation and alienation.

All these poems deal with the theme of alienation and loneliness, sense of loss and depravity.

The poem My Village presents a deep melancholy strain and a sense of longingness. Just as has been experienced by Toru herself while living in foreign countries:

*O fair sky of my native land.
 How much I miss thee here!
 And thee, O home- O sweet retreat!
 I ever held so dear
 Canst thou not, Sun, that openest now
 The summer's treasures free,
 Give back to me my sky and home
 My life and gaiety?*

Another example is taken from F. De. Gramont's sonnet, *Isolation*. How magnificently Toru accepts the sensitivity of isolation on her part as God's elegance:

*Blest isolation from the world, I see
 Herein thy emblem; may thy winding sheet
 Guard my soul likewise till its latest hour,
 That so through all its journey it may be
 Patient, until God's love with generous heat
 In heaven unfolds the blossom into flower.*

The Captive to the Swallows is the famous song of Beranger named *Les Hirondelles*. Again, a sense of longing and desire as well as a sad feeling of being detached from her loved ones is presented in this song. The theme of the poem is the captivity of a soldier, who is alone and therefore, welcomes the swallows from afar. He speculates that some of them might have been born upon the roof, beneath whose shade he first beheld, the light of morn. He asks them to convey information to him about his nation, and his beloved people:

*Who live there yet? and who have died?
 O speak, dear birds, for ye must know, -
 Who slumber happy side by side?
 And who, as exiles, live in woe?
 My country's birds, your tidings tell,
 As high ye circle in the air,
 Though never heart for me may swell
 Nor ever rise the mother's prayer.*

Many a times, Toru felt herself restrained, chained and disheartened. Examples are frequent and one can easily find them in *The Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*. The *Solitary Nest* written by M. D. Valmore depicts aptly Toru's desolate state of mind which is very touching:

*Go my soul; soar above the dark passing crowd,
 Bathe in blue ether like a bird free and proud,
 Go, nor return till face to face thou hast known
 The dream – my bright dream- unto me sent alone.
 I long but for silence, on that hangs my life,
 Isolation and rest – a rest from all strife;
 And oh! From my nest unvexed by a sob
 To hear the wild pulse of the age round my throb.*

Here her yearning to get rid of her long- drawn illness, her pain, suffering and her triple alienation comes out with sincerity. When Toru wrote her *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* a hitherto half open lotus was now able to blossom out in the rays of the Oriental sun in full bloom. However, much Toru loved England and France. she was subconsciously never at home in writing about these countries or in translating their

literature and it was when she gathered *A Sheaf in Sanskrit Fields* that her real poetic worth awoke. As far as the theme of isolation and alienation is concerned, each and every ballad of this book, and the miscellaneous poems, more or less give expression to it. Savitri, the first legend of the *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, deals with the theme of victory of love over death. Savitri, the heroine of the poem and the only issue of Madra's wise and powerful king, chose Satyavan as her 'life partner and willingly accepted the life of isolation and started to live in the hermitage without any mark of suffering or pain. The fears of many that Savitri could not live in a hut proved false and Savitri liked her new life very much. Still she was preoccupied by the prophesy of bereavement of Satyavan, made by Narad Muni:

*And yet there was a scepter grim,
 A skeleton in Savitri's heart,
 Looming in shadow, somewhat dim,
 But which would never thence depart.*

Toru also had a similar fate and felt likewise after the untimely death of her brother and sister. Just like Savitri, Toru herself bears all the anguish and waits for that crucial day. Thus, in *Savitri*, Toru feels, in some places, with Savitri, on description of her stoic resignation to the utmost will of God. She expected:

*No help from man, well, be it so!
 No sympathy, - it matters not!
 God can avert the heavy blow!*

Like Savitri, Toru, a firm believer in God, passed away from the earth firmly relying on her Saviour Jesus Christ, and in perfect peace.

The next poem *Lakshman*, tells us about Lakshman, the younger brother of Rama, the king of Ayodhya, who has abandoned his luxuries and comforts, on account of his love for his brother. Lakshman lived in the forest with his brother Rama, and his wife Sita. He was alienated from the rest of the society because he wanted to serve his brother. His alienation was self-imposed and deliberate.

The next ballad *The Royal Ascetic and the Hind* is the story of King Bharat, who ruled in Saligram. The king was discontented with the humdrum, ordinary world. He renounced it and went into the Woods to practice his ruthless reparation and discourteous privations. Everything went well with him until, one day; he had to rescue a fawn

struggling in the deep water for life. It became his only friend in his lonesome life, and he loves it to such an amount that even at the time of his death 'the hind was at his side, with tearful eyes watching his last sad moments like a child' and

*He too, watched and watched
 His favourite through a blinding film of tears,
 And could not think of the Beyond at hand,
 So keen he felt the parting, such deep grief."*

Here Toru beautifully expresses the affectionate feelings of King Bharata, at the time of his leaving from this world, for that fawn. The sentiment of alienation is once again apparent in the legend of Dhruva, as Dhruva was deprived of paternal love because of a governing stepmother. She scolds him insolently:

*Oh! Thoughtless! To desire the loftiest place,
 The throne of thrones, a royal father's lap!
 It is an honour to the destined given,
 And not within thy reach.*

Toru's outlook upon life had been pessimistic and gloomy. The main reason of this outlook was that she saw a number of tragedies at home, and that she hardly enjoyed a sound health. Toru's only brother Abju, dies in 1865 at an early age, plunging the entire family into misery and disappointment. Thereafter her loved sister Aru, adept in poetry and painting dies of consumption in 1874. This made the sensitive poetess sad and companionless. On the death of Aru, she wrote to her dear friend, Mary Martin, as follows: "The lord has taken dear Aru from us. It is a sore trial for us. But His will be done. We know that he doeth all things for us good." By and by, Toru's health ran down owing to recurrent attacks of fever and cough spasms, she spat a great deal of blood, which left her quite weak and prostrate. She was compelled to keep within the doors, and even writing letters was effort she could not stand. It is a harrowing tale indeed. How could a girl constantly attacked by disease and suffering be of an optimistic nature or paint the comic and the sunny sides of life in her work?

Toru's poetic compositions bear out the above statements. In both A sheaf and Ancient Ballads there are so many poems dealing with the buffets and sorrows of life, with death and diseases, with lost hopes and suppressed feelings. Of these, "The young captive" is to be marked out for its deep pathetic feeling. In it the captive says thus:

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

*And strike at the hearts when Despair is supreme,
 And shame hails thy dart as a boon!
 For me dales has arbors the unknown to the throngs,
 The world has delights; the Muses have songs,
 I wish not to perish too soon.*

And further:

*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.

The poem "My Vocation" is profoundly touching. It carries an intense personal tone. Only the first stanza is being given here to substantiate the point;

*A waif on this earth
 Sick, ugly and small,
 Condemned from my birth,
 And rejected by all,
 From my lips broke a cry,
 Such as anguish may wring,
 Sing, -said God in reply,
 Chant poor little thing.*

The lonely life of the poetess on this earth and her sickness and smallness are nicely pictured in it. Instances like this can be multiplied. In the poem "The Death of a Daughter", the heart wrenching description brings tears to the eyes. It runs as follows:

*Oh, I was wild like a mad man at first,
 Three days I wept bitter tears and accurst;
 O those whom God of your hope hates bereft!
 Fathers and mothers like me lonely left!
 Have ye felt what I felt, and known it all?
 And longed to dash your heads on the wall?
 Have you been like me in open revolt?
 And defied the Hand that had hurled the bolt?
 Does God permit such misfortune, nor care
 That our souls be filled with utter despair?
 It seemed as the whole were a frightful dream,
 She could not have left me thus like a fleam;
 Ha! That is her laughter in the next room!
 Oh no! she cannot be dead in the tomb,
 There shall he enter, -come here by this door,
 And her step shall be music to me as before.
 Oh! How oft have I said, -silence, -she speaks,
 Hold, -tis her hand on the key, and it creaks,
 Wait, -she comes! =I must hear, -leave me, -go out,
 For she is in this mansion somewhere without doubt.*

It is a heart rending poem; the father is unable to sustain the loss of his daughter. A good number of poems that Toru selected for her translating from the original French are actually of the same nature, having intensity of emotion and tenderness of feeling. In Ancient Ballads, the narratives are charged with lyric effusion of joy and pathos, anger and sorrow. As "Sita" the undeserved sufferings of a queen in the forest after having been exiled from Ayodhya by Rama. This is how Toru pictures Sita rebuking and taunting Lakshman:

*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,-But it makes
 Me shudder, and abhor my life.*

From every line of this passage anger and scorn leap up, and it is not difficult to deduce that Sita is not her usual self. The most moving lines in the whole of Ancient Ballads are the following from "Sita":

*But who is this fair lady? Not in vain
 She weeps, for lo! At every tear she sheds
 Tears from three pairs of young eyes fall amain,
 And bowed in sorrow are the three young hands.*

In them we find a deep sense of pathos. The autobiographical touch is also unmistakable in them. Taking the poem so far discussed onto

account, we can safely say that the notes of frustration and longing are predominant in Toru's poetry, and that suffering and gloom caused by ill-health were her shadow-campanions. Toru, no doubt, wages a heroic war against all odds, but had finally to succumb to the foul disease.

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