

Toru Dutt: A Multilingual Decoder and Re-Coder of French and Sanskrit Verses

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Abstract: *Toru Dutt is one of the great writers of English literature who will be remembered for ages for the eternal charm in her works. She was a versatile genius, a poet, novelist, as well as a translator. The short poetic career of Toru Dutt may be interpreted as the process of development from a translator into a poet. The poems from her two volumes fall into convenient groups that mark the stages of the evolution. She is a faithful translator of the original text at the first stage of her poetic career. All translations from A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields and the two pieces – Dhruva and the Royal Ascetic and the Hind from Ancient Ballads belong to the first stage. The translator grows into a transcreator in poems like Lakshman, Sindhu, Buttoo, Prahlad and Savitri from Ancient Ballads. The transcreator matures into an original poet in Jogadhya Uma and Sita in the same volume.*

Toru competently handled the apparatus of translation, and successfully showed that the translator is also the creator. Her translations are fairly close as a rule though not uniformly so. Originality of a translated verse depends upon its creator's serious efforts and supreme test of a translation is in considering it as an original composition. The translations of Toru Dutt certainly endure such rigid examination, and there are several which defy the reader to detect, from any inherent quality, that they were not purely spontaneous productions. There are serious faults at times, but these faults arise from no ineptness in reproducing the thought of the original author. She has translated her work meticulously and tries to recapture the spirit of the original to the maximum extent. Present paper is an analysis of Toru Dutt's handling of French and Sanskrit translation into English poems.

Blossoms of language have their roots in the soil of culture. Hence the identity in terms of language! To house one's sensibility in a language one has acquired and to which one is not exposed round the clock is a real challenge. Idiom is the vertebral column of poetic configuration. Genuine poetry is born out of a delicate balance between the potency of the language exploited and the richness of the operative sensibility. People across the globe have seen the potency of English language to cohabit with varied sensibilities.

Language and the artist are reciprocating partners associated in a kind of wedlock, clashing, coalescing and creating. The difference between one writer and the other and particularly between writers belonging to two different countries arises from "overlapping morphology of language and experience."¹ The sub verbal structure of experience relates the artist to his culture. His word-order is the camera eye of his world-order. Language is the verbal behavior of the artist, a response to the stimuli of life's experience. This brings the writer to the orbit of social racial, national and cultural consciousness. The idioms, images, metaphors, symbols, allusions and the tissues of experiences that constitute the world of the writer's work come both from his conscious and unconscious self.

In the context of Toru Dutt it may be noted that she is intensely conscious of language qua language and an effective use of English is one of her major achievements. English is a difficult language and one has to struggle hard with sentence and constructions but to Toru it comes as naturally as leaves come to tree and she uses its rhythm and diction with perfect skill and control. C. D. Narasimhaiah points out that Toru Dutt shows 'a rare feeling for words coupled with a reliance on speech rhythm'.²

The total literary output of Toru Dutt includes two books of poetry and two novels. **A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields** contains poems translated from French into English while **Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan** gives poetic translations from Sanskrit into English, along with some original pieces of her own. **Le Journal de Mademoiselle d' Arvers** is her attempt at writing a novel in French, whereas **Bianca** or **The Young Spanish Maiden** is her unfinished novel in English. The short poetic career of Toru Dutt may be interpreted as the process of development from a translator into a poet. The poems from her two volumes fall into convenient groups that mark the stages of the evolution. She is a faithful translator of the original text at the first stage of her poetic career. All translations from **A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields** and the two pieces – **Dhruva** and **The Royal Ascetic and the Hind** from **Ancient Ballads** belong to the first stage. The translator grows into a transcreator in poems like **Lakshman, Sindhu, Buttoo, Prahlad** and **Savitri** from **Ancient Ballads**. The transcreator matures into an original poet in **Jogadhya Uma** and **Sita** in the same volume.

As a faithful translator at the first stage of her poetic development, Toru Dutt endeavours to manipulate English for the purpose of translation, in the pieces from **A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields**. The translator struggles to convey the spirit of the original by sticking to the original metrical pattern in spite of occasional failures. In **Dhruva** and **The Royal Ascetic and the Hind** from **Ancient Ballads**, she is almost exclusively concerned with finding the literal equivalents for the original Sanskrit expressions. For instance, **The Royal Ascetic and the Hind** retells the story from the Thirteenth canto of the second section of **Vishnu Purana**. In the course of the verse narrative, the Sanskrit poet describes the grass after the deer have grazed on it a beautiful simile:

ete lunasikhastasya dasaniracirodgataih
kusakasa virajante batavah samagaiva.³

Toru Dutt translates it faithfully as:

The shaven stalks of grass,
Kusha and Kasha, by its new teeth clipped,
Remind me of it, as they stand in lines,
Like pious boys who chant the Samga Veds.
Shorn by their vows of all their wealth of hair. (Ancient Ballads)

As a beginner in the field of translation her anxiety to provide a literal equivalent for the original often leads her to awkward expressions. For instance in the legend of **Dhruva** taken from the **eleventh** canto of the first section of **Vishnu Purana** she translates the Sanskrit words **Sunityatmno Janma**⁴ as thou art sprung from Suneete's Bowels (p- 108)

Toru Dutt reaches the second stage of her poetic growth when she learns to submit her translative impulse to the guidance of her creative impulse. The creative impulse ushers itself in the form of her tendency to select, omit or elaborate the particular passage from the original texts, in order to accomplish the desired artistic effect. For instance a piece from the forty fifth canto of **Aranya Kanda** of the Ramayana chosen for translation in **Lakshman** contains the following speech of Lakshman:

Vakyamapratirupam tuna citram strisu maithili
Svabhavastvesa narinamevam Lokesu drsyate
Vimuktudharmascapalastikna bhedakarah striyah
.....
Striva dustasvabhavena guruvakey vyavasthitam.⁵

Romesh C. Dutt echoes its sense faithfully in the condensed translation of the Ramayana:

Daughter of Vedeha's monarch – pardon if!
Do thee wrong?

Fickle is the faith of woman, poison dealing

In her tongue.⁶

But Toru Dutt omits these remarks in order to chisel out a psychologically consistent portrait of noble hero. The conversational structure of the piece is however, the result of her attempt to imitate the original conversational pattern although critics like Harihar Das, P.C. Kotoky and Dwivedi seem to regard it as one of the welcome discoveries of Toru Dutt.

Savitri is the most significant expression of Toru Dutt's transcreative impulse. The awareness of the difference between the translated legend and its original has encouraged critics like Lotika Basu, Amarnath Jha, Alokranjan Das Gupta, Padmini Sen Gupta, P. C. Kotoky and C. D. Narasimhaiah to define its nature in various ways. The two pieces differ extensively mainly because of Toru Dutt's creative activity relates to her condensation of the original story through a mission of the events and details. Although she accepts the fivefold structure of the original, she achieves organic unity of the theme of Savitri's struggle against Death by omitting events like Savitri's birth, her journey in search of a suitable partner, the meeting between the fathers of Satyavan and Savitri and the actual marriage ceremony in the forest. The creative impulse of Toru Dutt participates further in translative activity in the form of the poet's invention of certain characters and events. She not only adds the characters of the mother of Satyavan and Savitri but even gives them independent roles in the story. She is also bold enough to invent the whole scene of the court of God of Death in heaven in the third section of her narrative. Perhaps it is based on her acquaintance with Milton's **Paradise lost**.

In **Buttoo** she analyses elaborately Buttoo's reaction to the bitter experience of humiliation at the hands of his teacher while narrating the event of his departure to the forest whereas the original winds it up in a single couplet. Technically the poem is 'one of the happiest and least affected of Toru's compositions'. The most remarkable feature of this poem in connection with the development of Toru's genius is the growth of conciseness, as in the moment of Buttoo's sacrifice where it would have been easy to succumb to the temptation to linger, and draw out sentiment :

Glanced the sharp knife one moment high,

The severed thumb was on the sod. (Ancient Ballads)

In **Prahlad**, the technique of the poem is 'far in advance of that of the earlier poems'. Scarcely do we meet the false rhyme (as in the 'heart' and 'thwart') or a line, which mars the poetic effect by its colloquialism (e.g. 'or there will come a fearful crash'). The poem reveals too a growing talent in selection on the poetess's part.

Jogadhya Uma marks the final stage of Toru Dutt's maturity as a poet. Though she succeeds in evoking the supernatural element in the narrative, her intellectual sensibility seems to be reluctant to come to terms with it. Hence, the poet is compelled to state in the concluding stanza:

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. (Ancient Ballads)

The sentimental plea for the justification of the story however weakens its artistic effect.

Sita, the last of the legends from Toru Dutt's **Ancient Ballads and legends of Hindustan** can be safely regarded as an original poem. The poem is also one of the earliest instances of the effective use of memory in Indian poetry in English. The poet's creative impulse is possibly activated by the only stanza from the forty eighth section of **Uttarkandam** of **Ramayana**:

Sa dukhabharavanta yasasvini yasodhara,

nathamapasyati Sati;

rurodasa bahirnanadite vane mohaswanam

dukhaparyana sati.⁷

These lines transform the objective translator into a subjective poet. Toru's simplicity, vividness, pathos and felicity of idiom that characterize her style may be seen in the closing lines of **Sita**:

When shall ah me! as erst at eventide? (Ancient Ballads)

Beauty of form in poetry depends on the style and diction of a poet. Toru's command of English language and the richness and variety of her poetic idiom are amazing. In her poetic volume **A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields** besides displaying a profound knowledge of English and French, Toru shows rare ability and promise of great achievements. The translator has furnished in this volume to lovers of literature some of the brightest gifts of the French muse in a neat, elegant and charming English dress. The vigour and naturalness of the following stanza from Victor Hugo's **lines** for instance is remarkable:

Ha! There's the sea gull. See it springs
Pearls scattering from its tawny wings
Then plunges in the gulf's once more
'Tis last in caverns of the main!
No! No! It upward soars again
As souls from trails upwards soar. (A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields)

The genuineness and spontaneity of Toru's rendering of Gautier's **What the Swallows Say** is simply marvellous:

Leaves not green, but red and gold,
Fall and dot the yellow grass,
More and even, the wind is cold,
Sunny days are gone, alas! (A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields)

Toru's diction is usually simple, clear and sweet though this is not literally true in case of some of her translations. Here is an example of her sweet diction:

What was the meaning – was it love?
Love at first sight, as poets sing,
Is then no fiction? (A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields)

And this is an illustration of her imperceptive diction to be found in some of her translations:

Dante, Old Gibelin! When I see only in passing
The plaster white and dull of this mask so puissant
That art has bequeathed us of thy features majestic
I cannot help feeling a slight shudder O poet;
So strongly the bond of genius and that of misfortune
Have imprinted upon them the dark seal of sorrow. (Sheaf)

But, this is exceptional. In many of her translations she writes with an inherent force that seems to have come spontaneously from her. In this context, one may quote **To those who sleep** by Victor Hugo:

Lo! He lifts up His Hand,
And the tigers fly howling through deserts of sand,
And the sea – serpents cowl
Obedient and meek! He breathes on idols of gold
In their temples of marble, gigantic and old

And like Dagon they fall! (A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields)

Toru shows in her poetry a fine sense of the English language, a feeling for its rhythm and diction. The poetry of heart, the beauty of colour and wealth of imagery charmed her. The sentiments expressed in Gensoul's **My Village** echo the translator's own sense of loss of her dear ones:

Oh fair sky of my native land,

How much I miss thee here!

And there, oh home – oh sweet retreat. (Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields)

In fact her translations are nothing but transcreations and reveal the force of her personality in its relatedness with greater cultural and literary heritage. For example in the translation of Vincent Arnault's **The Leaf**, Toru achieves a heightening of emotion and communicates not only the original poet's sensibility but also her own:

Detached from thy stalk,

Leaf yellow and dry

Where goest thou amain?

The tempest's fierce shock

Struck the oak proud and high. (A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields)

Her treatment of diction and rhythm is so remarkable that she was regarded by many critics as an English man writing under the pseudonym of Toru Dutt. There is elasticity in her verse, which makes it graceful and interesting. The modification of diction according to the need of the occasion may be easily found in it, she has thus used monosyllabic as well as polysyllabic diction with much success. As an example of the first variety we may quote following stanza from **Sindhu**:

Ah me! What means this? – Hark, a cry,

A feeble human wail,

“Oh God! It said – “I die, - I die,

Who'll carry home the pail?” (Ancient Ballads)

And for the second variety, the following extract from **Dhruva** may be quoted:

Mother, thy words of consolations find,

Nor resting place, nor echo in this heart,

Broken by words, severe, repulsing love

That timidly approached to worship. (Ancient Ballads)

The vast resourcefulness of Toru's diction is quite surprising. She, however, did not hesitate to give a twist or twang to the original whenever necessary and this makes her translation readable and pleasant. In some of her versions, the ideas rather than the actual expression of the French poem are reiterated or elaborated; Hugo's **Napolean Le Pefit** is a good specimen of her work. Though largely a free translation, it successfully reproduces the swing and the sarcasm of Hugo's verse and her substitution of Tom Thumb for **Le Petit** is a happy and original rendering. The first stanza of the rendering runs like this:

His grandeur dazzled history;

The god of war,

A star he was, - a mystery;

To nations far,

All Europe at his nod inclined

With terror dumb

Art thou his ape, March, march behind,
Tom Thumb, Tom Thumb. (A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields)

Some time Toru rejected words, phrases and sentences of the original, as seen above and replaced them by new ones. In this case the first stanza of Beranger's **My Vocation** may be quoted here:

A waif on this earth
Sick, ugly and small,
Contemned 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.

Its French original goes thus:

Jete sur cette boule
Laid, chetif, et souffrant;
Etouffe dans la foule
Faute d'etre assez grand;
Une plainte touchante
De ma bouche sortit
Le bon Diew me dit: Chante
Chante, pauvre petit! (A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields)

At Toru's hand the third and fourth lines underwent a meticulous change and 'Une plainte touchante' of the fifth line become 'such as anguish may wring'. But her weakness is also obvious in this translation – the substitution of 'Sing ____ Chant for 'Chante, Chante', it would have seen better and more English had she given us 'Sing. ... sing'. But she failed at a crucial moment here.

There are certain archaisms, inversions, and twisting, limping lines in her poetry. But such short comings are not remarkable. Toru has blended French words and expressions in her poetry without any hesitation, viz. *Va-nu-pieds* in the poem **On the fly-leaf of Erckman–Chatrian's Novel Entitled "Madame Therese"**. It must be admitted that she is not conversant with the colloquial turns of modern English.⁸

As a whole her diction is often in harmony with the theme and context. In short, it beguiles her years and the reader is left winking at the rich resourcefulness of her vocabulary. Edmund Gosse rightly praised:

"Toru possessed the rare virtue of absolute and unaffected exactness. An English translator will always try to smooth over elegance, rather than give us a true but awkward equivalent of the original. Toru even at the expense of losing her poetic value made a true translation".⁹

In the very beginning of her literary career Toru's versification was found to be rough and impassive. **The Englishman** pointed out, "Miss Dutt's metre often limps, her grammar is not always faultless and her expressions are sometimes quaint or tame". In this context Mr. Edmund Gosse quotes: "The sheaf Gleaned in French Fields is certainly the most imperfect of Toru's writings, but it is not the least interesting... the English verse is sometime exquisite; at other times the rules of our prosody are absolutely ignored, and it is obvious that the Hindu poetess was chanting to herself a music that is discord in and English ear."¹⁰

Harihar Das contradicts the views of the critics and is of the opinion that "Toru's command of English is wonderful," and that "it is difficult to realize that the book is not the work of an English

writer.”¹¹ The metrical skill of Toru Dutt is equally admirable. Although her metre, as pointed out by the critics, limps at times, it is often powerful enough to meet the occasion.

Sri. Aurobindo also supports the views of Harihar Das and observed: “She has written poetry not as an Indian writing in English but like an English woman.”¹² E. F. Oaten appreciates Toru’s real creative and imaginative power and her almost faultless technical skill.¹³

The Friend of India commented “this Bengali lady has given us a real book of translations from French poets in highly creditable English verse.”¹⁴

As far as, the **Sheaf**, is concerned, we find the metre at least is smooth and suggestive of no extra effort or hard toil in its making. Usually, Toru tries and succeeds to reproduce for the most part the actual metre of the original (or a metre as closely associated as possible) and such diversity of metre as the book displays, only serves to emphasize her own talent and skill.

Such for instance, is Brat’s **My Normandy** or Peyrat’s **Roland**. This is the last stanza of **My Normandy**:

There is an age, alas! In life,
When every idle dream must end,
An age of introspection rife,
With memories that cross and blend,
When such an age arrives for me,
And folds her wing, my Muse, to rest.
May I behold my Normandy.
The favoured land I love the best. (A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields)

The same kind of smooth rhythm and rhyme we can find in Aru’s rendering of Morning serenade; which critics have praised a lot.

The following extract from Hugo’s **lines** appropriately shows Toru’s sensitiveness to English tones:

Methinks Remorse
Hath such a cry, and such a force
Wail mothers thus for children gone!” (A Sheaf Gleaned in French
Fields)

The whole effect of the last line is in the simple inversion so deftly made. Similarly, her rendering of Hugo’s **The Rose and the Tomb** reveals the vitality and the beauty of her work:

The tomb said to the rose-
Of the tears the night strows,

What makest thou, O flower of the dawning? (A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields)

Here the metre is as close to the original as possible.

Toru tried her hand at blank verse too, but it seemed to be inexpressive and dull sometimes. Had she lived longer, let us so hope, she might have attained some distinction in it. In a note to a piece by Louis Bouitout, she says, “Although a Frenchman would faint away at the idea of blank verse, which is not allowed in French poetry, we have not hesitated to render this piece in that form, as well as others.”¹⁵ Her lines are all end stopped and she felt not so much comfortable in the handling of blank verse, though a few lines in **The Death of the wolf** and some in the **Ancient Ballads**, especially **The Royal Ascetic and the Hind**, **Dhruva**, and **Sita** lead us to believe that with more practice she would have been just as much adept in it, with the intention of form as in so many others, notably the sonnet. Here is a notable passage with which the piece entitled **The Royal Ascetic and the Hind** ends:

Not in seclusion, not apart from all,
Not in place elected for its peace,
But in the heat and bustle of the world,
'Mid sorrow, sickness, suffering and sin,
Must he still labour with a loving soul,
Who strives to enter through the narrow gate. (Ancient Ballads)

The **sheaf** is strangely unequal in merit. There are poem in it which read like bad prose translations, their closeness to the original being their sole worth. They lack the depth and gravity that is required for a good creative work. But some other poems of the volume are true product of genius.

Noted Critic Radha Kamal Mukherjee remarks that for Toru's perfect poems, readers will have to come to Ancient Ballads where deficiency in scholarship was greatly overcome; and the Muse now freed from the trammels of translation, came out in a gorgeous form.¹⁶

Padmini Sen Gupta maintains that Toru's ballads "run much more smoothly and do not limp as much as her French translations and are at the same time almost inspired".¹⁷

These critical opinions of various scholars convince that all are one and the same in the praise of Toru's poetic power and her master of balladry.

Toru competently handled the apparatus of translation, and successfully showed that the translator is also the creator. Her translations are fairly close as a rule though not uniformly so. Originality of a translated verse depends upon its creator's serious efforts and supreme test of a translation is in considering it as an original composition. The translations of Toru Dutt certainly endure such rigid examination, and there are several which defy the reader to detect, from any inherent quality, that they were not purely spontaneous productions. There are serious faults at times, but these faults arise from no ineptness in reproducing the thought of the original author. She has translated her work meticulously and tries to recapture the spirit of the original to the maximum extent.

Edmund Gosse praised her creative power through these words:

A rare virtue of Miss Toru Dutt's translations is their absolute and unaffected exactness. And English translator will always try to smooth over an inelegance _ _ _ . She translates what she sees before her, and if it is impossible to make the version poetical, she will leave it in its unpolished state, rather than add any traps of her own, or cut anything away from her author's text, In consequence, her book recalls the French more vividly than any similar volume we are acquainted with; and if modern French literature were entirely lost, it might not be found impossible to reconstruct a great number of poems- from this Indian version.¹⁸

Not that she has blindly followed the rules of translation to reproduce the same verse, in fact, she has changed words and phrases of the original and substituted them by more appropriate ones without showing any diffidence on her part that make her work literal and yet free. The verse co-relates with the rhythm of the original.

Some critics, such as R. W. Frazer, feel that Toru was not able to reproduce the rich Sanskrit language in English. This is not true as, in the works of **Kalidasa, Bana** or any of the Sanskrit writers, there is a flowery phraseology, an excess of praise of the hero and heroine, a magnificence in the descriptions of the grandeur of the gods and kings, a profusion and splendour of nature, which Toru has not been able accurately to reproduce, for she has modernized and shortened her translations to suit a foreign audience.

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