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Some feminist features of Toru Dutt's poetry

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Abstract

Toru Dutt, an Indian poet, and novelist, was a pioneer in women's empowerment and social justice in colonial India. Her poetry addresses various social issues, feminism, colonialism, and the underprivileged. Dutt's lyrical style often reflects an Eastern sensibility, indebted to Western influences. However, despite the dominant Western European tradition and the colonial context of her writings, she exhibits a strong sense of ethnic pride and an aspiration for equality. Through her poetry, Toru Dutt provided a platform for the voices of women to be heard. She lifted the veil of silence that surrounded issues surrounding women and used her art to challenge patriarchal norms. Her work demonstrated a feminist perspective in a society where it was not yet widespread, paving the way for future generations of Indian female writers to express their thoughts, experiences and perspectives. Dutt's commitment to feminism and human values is particularly significant, considering that it came to the fore during India's colonial period when women were often voiceless in their own society. She was thus a feminist pioneer and a crucial figure in the history of Indian Writing in English. The present paper is a humble attempt to study the prominent feminist features of Toru Dutt's poetry.

Keywords: Indian writing in English, colonialism, post colonialism, feminism

Introduction

Toru Dutt, an Indian poet, and novelist, was a pioneer in women's empowerment and social justice in colonial India. Her poetry addresses various social issues, feminism, colonialism, and the underprivileged. Dutt's lyrical style often reflects an Eastern sensibility, indebted to Western influences. However, despite the dominant Western European tradition and the colonial context of her writings, she exhibits a strong sense of ethnic pride and an aspiration for equality. One of Dutt's most notable poems on the theme of equality is "The Women of India." The poem addresses the issue of the marginalization of women and highlights the need for equality. The poem fervently calls for women's empowerment and rights by arguing that women deserve social, political, and economic equality. The women of India have been undermined, suppressed, and denied opportunities for too long, and the poem encourages women to assert their rights and stand up for themselves. Another poem, "Our *Casuarina* Tree," also touches upon the theme of equality. The poem narrates the life of two siblings who played under a *casuarina* tree. In the narrator's mind, she equates the tree with her sister, who the tree personifies in the poem. However, unlike the narrator, her sister was not allowed to attend school, and her friends looked down on her family's poverty. The poem emphasizes the importance of education and how it can be the bridge to bridge the gap between the privileged and underprivileged.

In her poem, "Sita," Dutt showcases the theme of equality and empowerment of women. The poem describes the legendary Indian goddess wife, Sita, who was immortalized in the Indian epic, Ramayana. Sita symbolizes women's strength and resilience, even in the face of adversity. The poem highlights the role that women have played and continue to play in society despite the patriarchal constraints. Through the following verses, Dutt portrays Sita's strength and resilience:

"She wept a few pale tears, then set
Her young face, made herself strong,

And bowed her head, nor in the least
Seemed doubtful or afraid of fate."

Finally, in the poem "Baugmaree," Dutt addresses the theme of equality by depicting the life of a peasant girl. The poem highlights the reality of the rural population's struggle for equality and justice. The poem also emphasizes the need to make education and healthcare available to rural areas, which further asserts the need for equality through social inclusion. The following lines highlight the message of the poem:

"Shall it then be always so,
That the many toil and sweat,
Turning the whole land to gold,
While the few keep what they get?"

Toru Dutt's poems reflect a strong sense of ethnic and gender pride, highlighting the theme of equality. Through the various themes of social justice, feminism, and colonialism, Dutt addresses equality in various forms. She calls for equality in access to education, social, economic, and political rights. Dutt's poems continue to inspire generations of women to stand up for themselves and fight for their equality rights. Her contributions to the feminist movement and gender equity continue to shape Indian literature and propel the feminist movement's agenda.

One significant women's issue that Toru Dutt addresses in her poetry is the societal expectations of beauty and physical appearance. In the poem "Sita," Dutt explores the physical beauty of women and how it can be used as a tool of oppression. The narrator describes Sita, the wife of the Hindu God Rama, as "fairer than the sun." This description shows the societal pressure on women to maintain certain physical standards, which ultimately poses a significant barrier to full self-expression. Sita's beauty leads to her confinement and suffering, and she is eventually banished to uphold her husband's honor. Dutt's portrayal of Sita illustrates how society's shallow perception of beauty can be used against women to subjugate and control them. In another poem, "The Lotus," Dutt explores the societal expectation for women's behavior. The poem depicts a woman like the lotus flower, who must remain calm and serene, living a life of purity and submission. Women, according to this societal norm, must not show any sign of passion or assertiveness, but rather comply with the expectations of purity and passivity. The poem suggests that societal expectations can be incredibly restrictive to women, preventing them from pursuing their dreams and achieving their full potential. Moreover, the poem highlights the unfair standards set for women in society and the hypocrisy behind such expectations.

Dutt also addresses the issue of women's education in her poem, "Our *Casuarina* Tree." The narrator reflects on her childhood years with her brother, under a *casuarina* tree that her brother calls "My Tree." The video personifies the *casuarina* tree, describing it as the narrator's sister, who died. The tree symbolizes the narrator's sister's unfulfilled potential, as she was not educated because of societal expectations. The narrator laments the fact that she and her sister were not given equal opportunities to learn and grow. The poem highlights the glaring inequalities in the educational system and the opportunity gaps created to exclude women, denying them the ability to be self-sufficient and realize their full potential. Moreover, in her poem, "The Heroine of Kharu," Dutt portrays a feminist heroine who

defies societal expectations of women's behavior. In the poem, a woman named Kulsum takes up arms to fight and defend her home against the British. Kulsum's act of rebellion is significant because society expects women to play meek and obedient roles, and defying these expectations was considered taboo. Her bravery and defiance serve as an inspiration and source of motivation for the liberation struggle. Toru Dutt's poetry addresses various women's issues such as societal expectations on beauty, education, and women's roles in society. Through her poems, she confronts gender inequality and sheds light on the realities of women's lives in deeply patriarchal societies. Her works are still relevant today, as they illustrate the long-standing struggle for the equality of the sexes and the need for a society that addresses women's issues and values their contribution.

Toru Dutt's literary works confront the theme of hypocrisy against women in colonial India. Her poems expose the social conventions and gender inequalities that constrained women's lives, illustrating the discrepancy between the public rhetoric concerning women and their actual treatment. Through her poetry, she highlighted the hypocrisy of the male-dominated society and drew attention to the pervasive mistreatment of women. One recurring theme in Toru Dutt's poetry is the hypocritical expectation that women must be submissive and obedient while men are allowed to indulge in their desires. In the poem "The Lotus," the narrator reflects on the hypocrisy of society's expectations of women:

"O Lotus, rising from the wave,
Or resting on its tranquil breast,
Thy petals fair are types of those
Who calmly float through life at rest"

The poem implies societal expectations for women to be calm and peaceful, but it also highlights the mistreatment of women. The poem portrays women as the victims of society's expectations, forced to conform to the roles imposed upon them. Women's desires are not permissible since they are expected to remain subservient at all times. The poem shows that women can only survive by accepting their fate and resigning themselves to their specific roles.

Another example of the hypocrisy against women in Toru Dutt's poetry is the juxtaposition of the lotus flower to the female body. In the poem "Sita," the narrator describes Sita, the woman from the Hindu epic Ramayana, as "lovely as a lotus," highlighting her physical beauty. However, her physical beauty becomes her Achilles heel, and she is punished for it. Her gender renders her unable to fight against societal expectations of her submissive behavior, and she becomes the victim of her beauty. Dutt's poems, therefore, challenge men's hypocrisy, who use such beauty to control women.

Furthermore, one of Dutt's most impactful poems, "Our *Casuarina* Tree," epitomizes the theme of hypocrisy against women. The narrator reminisces about her childhood home, where she spent much time with her brother. The tree is depicted personifying the sister, who is now deceased. The loss of the sister is not the only tragedy the poem addresses; it also highlights the societal norms that restrict women's freedom, such as education. In the poem, the narrator feels a sense of loss and injustice at the limitations placed on her due to being a girl. The *casuarina* tree, which she loves, comes to represent her lost opportunities and unachieved potential. In this poem, Dutt demonstrates how patriarchal norms limit

women's intellectual and social mobility, resulting in women being kept in the background or neglected. Toru Dutt's poems address the theme of hypocrisy against women in colonial India, revealing the societal expectations of women's behavior alongside men's exploitation of women. Through literary devices such as the lotus and the *casuarina* tree, Dutt portrays a society that prizes women's beauty but at the same time, keeps them in subservient roles, providing little agency. Dutt's works aimed to challenge the patriarchy, expose its inherent inequities and show how such limitations degraded female potential. By doing so, Dutt contributed to the ongoing debates surrounding gender equality, helping break the silence around women's issues and advocating for an equal status, unfettered by hypocrisy or societal expectations. Toru Dutt was one of the first Indian women to write in English and to provide a feminine voice in the male-dominated Indian writing genre. Her writings shed light on the persistent oppression of women in patriarchal societies, most notably the Indian society during the colonial era. By writing about her experience and struggle as a woman, Dutt opened up a dialogue and sparked debate on the issue of gender inequality. Her poetry and prose works, including *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* and *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* feature strong female protagonists and heroines. They are portrayed as intelligent, brave, independent, and assertive. These characters challenge the notion that women are passive, and their narratives inspire readers to believe that women possess inherent strength and capabilities. Dutt's poetry and prose challenge patriarchal interpretations of femininity and womanhood by critiquing the social structures and cultural norms that enable women's oppression. Her works exposed the hypocrisy and artificiality of social conventions that limit women's opportunities and freedom. For example, in her poem "The Queen's Gift," Dutt provides a subtle critique of the arranged marriage system that commodifies women's bodies and reduces them to mere instruments of political and economic gain. Her writings aimed to encourage women to challenge the restrictive female stereotypes that were perpetuated in their society. Furthermore, Toru Dutt's feminism was not limited to her literary works; it was also part of her lived experience. She defied patriarchal norms by pursuing a college education, which was a rare accomplishment for women in the colonial era. She traveled to Europe, where she was influenced by the feminist and intellectual movements of the time. Her life and works demonstrated that women could contribute meaningfully to society, and they deserve respect and equal treatment in all spheres of life. Toru Dutt's legacy as a feminist writer remains relevant today, and her works continue to inspire and influence contemporary writers. Her writings highlight the importance of recognizing women's contribution to the society and the need for empowering women economically and socially. She challenged the silence and social conventions that kept women in subjugation, and her works continue to be a source of empowerment and inspiration for women today. Toru Dutt's role as a feminist writer in Indian Writing in English cannot be overemphasized. She contributed immensely to the discourse on gender inequality and challenged the patriarchal norms of her time. Her works opened up a dialogue on women's issues and inspired many other writers, male and female alike, to take up the cause of gender equality. The relevance of her works to contemporary feminism cannot be overstated, and her legacy as a feminist icon will continue to inspire

generations of women to come.

In the poem, "The Broken Wing," Toru Dutt addresses the limited economic opportunities available to women in colonial India. The poem is narrated from the perspective of a woman who is mourning the loss of her husband, a man who was her sole breadwinner. The woman is left destitute and must rely on the charity of others to survive. The persona in the poem illustrates the economic vulnerability of women in patriarchal societies. Similarly, in "The Sower," Dutt describes a woman who works tirelessly to farm her land and provide for her family. The poem speaks to the plight of women who struggle to provide for themselves and their families while facing financial limitations and social prejudices. The poem also highlights the resilience and determination of women to provide for themselves and their families in the face of adversity. In "The Queen's Gift," the persona describes the economic exploitation and oppression of women in a patriarchal society. The poem is narrated from the perspective of a queen who is forced to offer her hand in marriage to secure political and economic gain for her kingdom. The poem highlights the objectification of women and their bodies, which are used as currency to gain economic standing.

In "The Song of the Stream," Dutt highlights how women's economic contributions were often ignored or overlooked in colonial India. The poem discusses how the stream, which represents the work of women, is seen as insignificant and unimportant compared to the work performed by men. The poem's persona suggests that women's work is not valued, despite contributing to the economy in countless ways. Lastly, in "Sita," the persona speaks of the economic dependence placed on women in patriarchal societies. The poem speaks of the expectations placed on women to be financially reliant on their husbands, and the distress and pain that arise when these expectations are not met. The poem highlights the economic oppression of women in patriarchal societies, in which women are not allowed to pursue financial independence or autonomy. Toru Dutt's poems illustrate the economic oppression of women in colonial India. The poems bring to light the gender-based economic inequalities that pervade patriarchal societies, and the necessary struggle for women's economic independence and autonomy. Through her poetry, Toru Dutt speaks to the struggles and hopes of women, seeking to amplify their voices and experiences in the face of economic inequality.

In "The Lotus," the speaker describes the plight of a lotus that has been plucked from its natural environment and is now on the verge of wilting. This metaphor extends to the plight of women who are displaced from their native homes and societies. The poem captures the sense of loss and loneliness that these women experience, along with their feelings of disconnect and alienation from the new environment. Similarly, in "The Tree of Life," the speaker describes a tree that has been uprooted from its natural surroundings and replanted in a new location. The persona compares the tree's plight to that of a woman who is taken away from her home and subjected to a new culture, environment, and way of life. The poem highlights the struggle a woman faces when she is removed from her familiar surroundings and forced to adapt to new customs and societal norms.

In "The Indian Gypsy," the speaker presents a strong female character who is forced into displacement due to the circumstances of her life. The Indian Gypsy is a woman who has lived a life of wandering, searching for a place to call

home. The poem highlights the courage and resilience of women in the face of displacement and their ability to find new ways to belong and survive. In "A Memory," the speaker describes a woman who is displaced from her home by marriage. The poem speaks to the loss of identity, traditions, and heritage that women can suffer when they are forced to leave their native homes. The persona laments the powerlessness of women in patriarchal societies, where they are often at the mercy of their male counterparts. Lastly, in "Our *Casuarina* Tree," the speaker recalls the tree's presence in the courtyard of their childhood home, which serves as a vehicle to recall childhood memories and experiences. The poem's persona connects the displacement of women to a profound sense of nostalgia, as they reflect on the absence, loss, and longing that accompanies their journeys through life. Toru Dutt's poems explore the theme of female displacement with sensitivity and depth. Her work speaks to the contradictions, tensions, and complexities that surround this topic. Dutt's poems highlight the experiences of women who are forced to adapt to new environments, struggle to find new ways of belonging, and preserve their heritage despite societal displacement. Her poems remind us that the process of adaptation is not always easy, and requires strength and resilience on the part of the displaced individual. Through her work, Toru Dutt illuminates the many different experiences of female displacement and invites us to reflect on the human condition of being displaced.

In "Sita," Dutt gives a voice to Sita, the celebrated heroine of the Hindu epic, Ramayana. The poem portrays Sita as a symbol of resilience and strength who stands up against the strict gender roles of her time. The poem speaks of her struggles and is a commentary on the societal expectations of women, particularly in traditional Indian society. In "In the Forest," the speaker describes the beauty of nature and the different dimensions of femininity. The poem defies the classical portrayal of women in literature as delicate, passive, and vulnerable. Instead, it explores the idea of women's strength and independence, challenging the rigid gender roles prevalent in society. "Sitamau" is another one of Dutt's poems that deal with women and gender roles. The poem tells the story of a Rajput princess who defies societal expectations by choosing to die rather than be forced into an arranged marriage. The poem portrays the princess's inner strength and bravery in going against societal norms and her family's expectations.

In "The Broken Flute," the speaker speaks of a flute that is broken, and the music is lost. The poem symbolizes the loss of the feminine voice in society, the absence of the chance for women to express themselves and contribute their talents. The poem seeks to highlight the importance of empowering women and recognizing the value of their contributions to society. Lastly, "The Lotus," presents the imagery of a lotus, a symbol of feminine beauty and grace. The poem captures the essence of women's power, beauty, and courage. The speaker admires the strength, resilience, and endurance that women possess. Toru Dutt's poems portray the challenges of gender roles in Indian society. The poems reflect on the struggle against the traditional gender expectations and the limitations that have been imposed on women. Her poems give voice to women's struggles and aspirations, defying the narrow roles that are created for them. Through her poems, Dutt emphasizes the importance of empowering women and recognizing their contributions to society. Dutt's poems continue to be relevant today, echoing the fight for gender

equality and the need to acknowledge women's strengths and talents.

In "Our *Casuarina* Tree," Dutt depicts a tree that is very important to her family, representing the family's history and tradition. However, the speaker of the poem is not identified as male or female, which suggests that the poem is about a family tree that is important to all genders. Nevertheless, the specific mention of how the male members of the family use the tree to shelter themselves from the noonday heat suggests a form of patriarchal oppression. The poem also hints at how the tree represents the continuation of patriarchal lineages and how that can lead to societal oppression across generations. In "The Lotus," Dutt explores how patriarchy creates misunderstandings and power imbalances between genders. The poem describes a woman, who is oppressed and overlooked because she is a woman. The speaker marvels at the cruelty of a society that judges women only by their beauty and not their worth. Through her works, Dutt recognizes the role that patriarchy plays in denying women the respect and value that they deserve.

In "In The Forest," Dutt's speaker poignantly describes the sexual violence that women face as a result of patriarchal oppression. The poem depicts a woman who is being chased by a man with ill intentions, and the woman is unable to escape. The poem powerfully captures the fear, desperation, and pain that women experience in patriarchal societies, where men feel entitled to women's bodies and control their mobility. Lastly, "Arabian Nights" explores how cultural narratives perpetuate patriarchal oppression. The speaker of the poem feels conflicted by the stories that she has heard, which uphold a patriarchal worldview. In the poem, she observes the tales told by her father, which seem to shape her reality, but also make her believe that her role as a woman is secondary. The poem illuminates how social norms have been internalized and how even women can become complicit in their own oppression. Toru Dutt's poems are a powerful reminder of the pervasive influence of patriarchal oppression in the Indian society. Her poetry brought attention to the problems that women faced in a society entrenched in patriarchal norms. Her works encourage readers to recognize and challenge patriarchal oppression and to work toward gender equality. Therefore, Toru Dutt's poetry remains important for its powerful message of resistance against patriarchal oppression.

In "A Ringlet," Dutt presents a young girl growing into a woman, exploring her physical and emotional identity. The poem describes the ringlet of hair that the girl has cut off to transform herself into a woman. The speaker in the poem describes the ringlet as a symbol of her past and sees her new identity as freedom and escape from her girlhood. This poem explores the transformation of a young girl into a woman and the ways in which this change can bring about a newfound sense of identity. Dutt's "Lakshmana" is another poem that examines the theme of female identity. The poem depicts a young girl who is acutely aware of her societal and gender identity, trying to come to terms with them. Lakshmana represents the struggles of a young woman who is trying to establish her own identity, while still clinging to her past traditions and social expectations. The poem is an ode to the inherent strength of women and their ability to navigate societal expectations while manoeuvring towards their individual identity and fulfilment.

Furthermore, in "Sita," Dutt presents Sita, the Hindu goddess, as a symbol of the female identity. Sita becomes a powerful

emblem of a woman's ability to rise beyond societal expectations, steadfastly committed to her own sense of self. Through her loyalty, sense of duty, and determination, Sita demonstrates that women are not merely victims of societal norms and conventions but are strong, independent, and fully capable of asserting their own identity. Lastly, "Baugmaree" is an excellent example of how Dutt portrays a woman's identity within the context of culture and tradition. In the poem, the woman, Baugmaree, is the embodiment of her cultural heritage, her experiences, and her individual aspirations. She represents both the good and the bad of traditional values, while still promoting independence and individuality. Toru Dutt's poetry reflects the theme of female identity as a fluid and dynamic concept that changes and progresses with time. Through her poetry, Dutt oscillates between the traditional ideals and the newly emerging contemporary ideas of feminine identity, allowing the readers to experience various facets of womanhood. Her portrayal of female characters that navigate societal expectations, asserting their own sense of identity serves as an inspiration to all those struggling to make sense of their own identity. Therefore, Toru Dutt's works remain important contributions to the discourse on the complexities of feminine identity.

Toru Dutt spent the majority of her childhood in Calcutta, during the time when Indian society was largely patriarchal with little regard for the voices and rights of women. However, despite the norms and expectations of the society in which she lived, she began to explore and express feminist ideas through her poetry. Her poems focused on various themes, including nature, love, death, and spirituality. However, her most striking work reveals her feminist visions, provoking and challenging the hierarchies and roles that were assigned to men and women in a British Colonial India. One of her most prominent works, "The Lotus," is an exploration of a woman's life through different stages, which are represented by the lotus with its various stages of growth. The poem provokes the idea of female autonomy and independence within a patriarchal society. The poem gives voice to silenced and suppressed women through the protagonist's intrinsic character, that of being independent, resilient, and strong-willed. The theme of female solidarity is also evident in the poem where the protagonist seeks comfort and refuge among the other women who are also enduring the vicissitudes of life.

Another of Toru Dutt's feminist poems is "Savitri," which narrates the mythological story of a woman who challenges patriarchal expectations by choosing her own partner, walking away from the norm of an arranged marriage. By breaking these norms, she is met with societal opposition and is ultimately burnt alive. The poem shows the harsh reality of women in patriarchal societies in India at the time, as well as the repercussions of their choices. Through her poetry, Toru Dutt provided a platform for the voices of women to be heard. She lifted the veil of silence that surrounded issues surrounding women and used her art to challenge patriarchal norms. Her work demonstrated a feminist perspective in a society where it was not yet widespread, paving the way for future generations of Indian female writers to express their thoughts, experiences and perspectives. Dutt's commitment to feminism and human values is particularly significant, considering that it came to the fore during India's colonial period when women were often voiceless in their own society. She was thus a feminist pioneer and a crucial figure in the history of Indian Writing in English. Toru Dutt remains

a pivotal figure in Indian Writing in English as her poetry served as an avenue to advocate for women's rights and positions. Her ability to address sensitive social issues and question patriarchal norms in her poetry illuminates Toru Dutt's role as a feminist poet-crusader during a time when sexism and gender roles prevailed in society. The influence of her distinctive feminist perspective resonates till this day and will continue to inspire generations of women artists, thinkers and writers.

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