



## A LIFE CUT SHORT : TORU DUTT & TRANSCULTURAL BORDER CROSSING

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### ABSTRACT

The earliest record of transcultural border crossing dates 2500 years back when Buddhist pilgrims left India to spread the teachings of Buddha mostly in Central and east Asia. People from the West coast of India established a thriving sea trade with Eastern Africa as well as central and South Africa from the first century. During the nineteenth century colonial rule there were more such journeys. Indians visited Europe, mostly England for higher education. However, most of such visits were for a limited period only, as there were few Indians who would go and settle in England or the US.

Indians who left their homeland and lived abroad, often experienced sense of dislocation, marginalization, cultural insularity, social disparity, racism. They were in a dilemma as to whether they should remain in a ghetto of old values with least interaction with the majority, or break the barriers and get assimilated with the new culture. This overwhelming condition prompted many to write their experiences. The quest for individuality, the theme of journey through space and time, the acceptance or rejection of categorization, confrontation with patriarchal constraints, and the tendency to seek self definition in comparison with behavior of others are recurring themes.

**Key words:** Marginality, Dislocation, Hybridity

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Toru Dutt can be termed as the first transcultural woman writer because of her intellectual displacement from one culture to another. She was well travelled, she read and wrote about Western cultures. In her reproduction of the ancient Indian texts through translation, she was trying to build bridges between the East and the West, ultimately inverting the process of domination of the other.

It is important to introduce personal history of Toru Dutt to understand her work. She was born on 4 March 1856, in a Hindu family in Rambagan in Calcutta [now Kolkata]. Her father,

GovinChunderDutt, was a poet and a well-read person. Her mother, Kshetramoni, though not formally educated, was well-versed in Bengali and English. She was the niece of Michael Chandra Dutt, the famous poet and playwright in English. Her father GovinChunderDutt and her uncles Hur and Greece Chunder along with their nephew Omesh bought out an anthology called the *Dutt Family Album* in 1870. The Dutt family, which also includes poets and writers like ShosheeChunderDutt, RomeshChunderDutt was converted to Christianity in 1862, after about nine years of emotional struggle. This conversion caused a temporary

estrangement between Toru's parents, her mother being a devout Hindu. The family experienced several tragedies; the first of which in 1865 was the death of Abju, the only son of GovinChunderDutt at the age of fourteen. After this tragic event, in 1869, the Dutt family left for Europe, for a change and the hope of getting a better environment. The two sisters, Toru and Aru learned French while studying in a French school in Nice. They spent the next two years in England, with the girls attending lectures for women at Cambridge. They returned to India when Toru was 17. The next year, Aru died of consumption, an ailment which was also consuming Toru away and was soon to take her life.

Born and brought up in a family which was considered enlightened, Toru Dutt took to writing naturally. She published two collections of poetry, in collaboration with her sister Aru, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1876) and *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*, posthumously, in 1882. Besides poems in original, and in translation, she wrote two novels: *Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden* in English (1878, 2000) and *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* in French (1879), both being published posthumously

*Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* and *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* consist mostly of translations from Sanskrit and French into English. Her translations are sometimes free, which enable her to express her own views. It could be said, as Kurjatto-Renard has suggested, that she was trying to express a migrating subject, mimicking the movement of her own travels in the emigration of literary texts (26). Through her translations, she wanted to propose a transcultural study of ancient Indian literature.

Toru Dutt attempted to unite each of her identities by expressing them through the different languages that those identities consisted of (English-French-Sanskrit). During the colonial period it was not easy to live in India as a Hindu Christian. The English and Bengali were involved in internalized conflicts, and French represented a neutral territory for Toru. French becomes a "third space" safe from the historical conflicts that plagued colonial India. G. J. V. Prasad points out in his 'Introduction' to *The Diary of Mademoiselle D'Arvers*, the English

rendering of *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* that she was

a truly bilingual writer but with characteristic ironic postcolonial twist, whose bilingual creative competence is in two colonial languages-- English and French! She was heir to three traditions, distanced from, even while feeling herself at home in each, making her creative choices from all three in order to construct her own identity. (xviii)

Toru Dutt's *Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden* can be considered as the first immigrant novel written by a female Indian expatriate writer. Primarily a love plot, the story deals with themes common to immigrant writings. The protagonist Bianca Garcia stands on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused. She is aware of her *difference* in the society in which she resides. Many times in the text, other characters refer to Bianca's dark skin and gypsy looks, thereby *othering* her.

Bianca Garcia is a Spanish girl who lives in England with her father. The novel opens with the funeral of Inez Gracia, her elder sister. It soon becomes evident that there were other children and Bianca's mother who died also, which places Bianca and her father in the eternal grief and isolation. The motherless character deprived at once of her biological mother and of her motherland hints at the situation of the immigrants.

The novel includes a love plot. Two young men propose to Bianca, one she doesn't want and the one she loves, is rich and his mother despises Bianca due to her ethnic background. Henry's mother does not want the daughter of a Spanish refugee even though she is of "genteel" status, that when the girl in question has "a sooty complexion, a snub nose, a low forehead, and a girl without a penny" (Dutt 67).

Through Bianca and her father Mr. Gracia who were Spanish immigrants, and their characteristic resistance to hybridization, Dutt tries to narrate how immigrants are easy victims of *otherisation*. Like her characters, Toru and her father were also immigrants, who had perhaps to cope with the problematics of acceptance in the

hegemonic English and French societies. In fact, the problem in *Bianca* is basically that of the otherisation of the Garcia family who are looked down upon by the conservative English, represented by Henry's mother. In one of her letters to her friend Mary Martin Toru Dutt writes that "the Europeans are generally supercilious and look down upon Bengalis" (Das 8). In her letters she has always mentioned how the Europeans/English distanced themselves from the Indians by their rudeness and show of supposed power.

She seems to be wary of her segregated life in Calcutta. She mentions in the same letter,

We do not go much into society now. The Bengali reunions are always for men. Wives and daughters and all women-kind are confined to the house, under lock and key, *a la letter* .... (Das 8)

It may, therefore, be assumed that the locale of her novels had to be the West. It was in the West, where she could have choice, and be free to listen to and express her desires, through western heroines/protagonists. Through them she could explore her fears, her desires, and her bodily passions. Moreover, through her she found expression of her notions of marginalization and class conflict.

It is interesting to point out here that Toru Dutt's two novels -- the French novel *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* and the English *Bianca: Or the Young Spanish Maiden*-- have a lot of things in common. Both Marguerite and Bianca's physical appearance evokes Toru's own. Both the characters share a special relationship with their fathers which may remind Dutt's own attachments with her father. As in *Le Journal*, also in *Bianca*, the protagonists lose, just as in the life of Toru Dutt, a sister. *Bianca* opens with the funeral of Inez which reminds the reader of a similar loss suffered by Toru Dutt herself. Even Clarisse Bader (1840-1902), the translator of the French novel notes that the heroine of the French novel, Marguerite resembles the author (Mund "Lost in 'a strange light'" 177).

*Le Journal* begins with Marguerite's fifteenth birthday and is an account of her unrequited love for one of her neighbours, Dunois, count of Plouarven, and her subsequent marriage to

her parents' favourite, Louis Lefèvre. The double love depicted is also a reflection of the author's double cultural heritage and split identity.

It may also be presumed that the female protagonists of both the novels are portrayed in the light of the heroines of ancient Sanskrit verses. Toru had been translating at that time. Both Marguerite and Bianca are firm believers, and religion provides a guideline to their lives. Marguerite and Bianca are both gifted for literary studies, but at the same time they have strong bodies and strong personalities. Contrary to the colonial imaginings of native women as passive, they are depicted as independent, strong-willed, and capable of fending for themselves. They resemble Savitri from Dutt's poem of the same title in *Ancient Ballads*, which is a free translation of an episode from the *Mahabharata*. Knippling rightly points out that Toru Dutt focused on the "neglected aspects of the myth", that is to say Savitri's freedom, mobility, individuality and right to self-determination (20).

Dutt's protagonist in *Bianca: Or the Young Spanish Maiden* searches for identity and acceptance, her life in the periphery problematizing and exposing the fallacy of cultural homogeneity. Both the creator and the creation find themselves in a confrontation with their own tradition as well as the cultural background of the host society. The overlapping of identities creates a cultural hybridity. Published posthumously, the exact period of writing of the novel is unclear, and it ends abruptly. Bianca admits the ambiguity of her cultural and national affiliations, embracing the dislocation and the in-between-ness of her identity as a migrant.

However, the end leaves with a question: Is hybridity the effect of the newly awakened subjective position, or is it the cause of such transformation?

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