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'True picture of Vedantic India : Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan by Toru Dutt'

Abstract:

Toru Dutt is a very respectable name in English literature. She was like a short lived angel who shone in the sky of literature like bright star. Toru Dutt had English upbringing and her family practiced Christianity but she was through and through an Indian. And this indianness and respect for her culture is seen through her marvelous work 'Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan'. My paper is about this excellent craft of miss Toru Dutt who is often called as Keats of Indian English literature.

Key Words: Buttoo, Dhruva, Gosse, Laxman, Prahlad, Sita and Savitri.

Short Biography of Toru Dutt:

Toru Dutt an extra ordinarily gifted girl was born to famous Rambagan Dutt family in Calcutta on 4th March, 1856. Her father Govin Chunder Dutt himself was a good linguist, poet and cultured man. Her mother Kshetramoni was a highly intelligent and traditionalist lady. The children Abju, Aru and Toru received their education and training under the supervision of their poet cum linguist father. The family was brilliant in many matters but like gold tested by fire, the family suffered the untimely deaths of its young once within short time. In 1862 Dutt and his family adopted Christianity. Later in 1865 the only son Abju died at the age of fourteen. In 1869 they went to Europe and there the sisters attended of a French school at Nice for a short while. The sisters began to read paradise lost for consolation to their sorrows.

According to Margaret Macnicol, Toru's knowledge of these languages (French and English) was astonishing which can be seen in her 'The Sheaf'. In September, 1873, they returned to Calcutta and next year 1874 Aru died of consumption. This tragedy made Toru lonely and sad. Now she longed for relief in learning Sanskrit with his father but by 1877 she was getting weak day by day. She herself became a victim of consumption. On 30th August, 1877 consumption consumed her forever, leaving her parents all alone and deserted. She was buried at the CMS cemetery in Calcutta near her dead brother and sister.

Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan:

Gosse wrote an introductory Memoir for Ancient Ballads. There he observed, "Her name . . . is no longer unfamiliar the ear of any well-read man or woman" (vii). Indeed, according to Gosse, "It is difficult to exaggerate when we try to estimate what we have lostr in the premature death of Toru Dutt. Literature has no honors which need have been beyond the grasp of a girl who at the age of twenty-one, and in languages

separated from her own by so deep a chasm, had produce so much of lasting worth” (xxvi). Gosse thus concludes the Introductory Memoir by insisting, “ When the history of literature of our country comes to be written, there is sure to be a page in it dedicated to this fragile exotic blossom of song” (xxviii).

Though Toru Dutt was brought up in European Education and Christian religion, she was not separated from her roots. Her mother gave her all the knowledge about Indian culture in Tradition. Her Sanskrit studies also proved quite helpful in this context as these stories were mainly from Purans and Kathas. The collection of Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan includes the following Poems – Savitri, Laxman, Jogadya Uma, The Royal Ascetic and the hind, Dhruva, Buttu, Sindhu, Prahlad and Sita.

‘The Legend of Buttoo’ is a story from the ‘Mahabharata’. In it buttoo is a low born hunter’s son, he respects and worships Dhronacharya and considers him as his Guru. It was with its strong determination and that he attain perfection in the art of archery, but Dhronacharya persuaded by Arjun’s jealousy demands the right thumb of Buttoo as mark of his Gurudakshina. And immediately without any thought, Buttoo offered it to his Guru –

“Glanced the sharp knife one moment high
The served thumb was on the sod,
There was no tear in Buttoo’s eye
He left the matter with his God”.

Dhronacharya was so much moved by this attempt of his pupil and he blessed immortality for buttoo that his name would be immortal as a great archer.

‘The story of Dhruva’ is about prince Dhruva, the son of a less favored queen. He is neglected by his father. And due to interference of his step-mother he is not allowed to sit in the lap of his father. When he cries, his mother consoles him and inspires him to seek for the lap of almighty father – The God. And then he says –

“I shall try
The highest good, the loftiest place to win,
Which the whole world deems priceless and desires”.

He lefts his father’s house, went to the woods to live among the hermits and eventually realized his ambition, as a result of which he shines as a Glorious Star.

Jogadhya Uma is a tale of goddess Uma. It tells of the sudden appearance of the goddess Uma to a simple pedlar and not to a ritualistic priest. Toru finds this tale to be near her heart and she says she also believe in modesty and simplicity Toru comments –

“Absurd may be the tell I tell
Ill-suited to the marching times,
I loved the lips from which it fell,

So let it stand among my rhymes”.

‘Lakshman’ is a poem from the legend of Ramayan. It is in form of conversation between Sita and Laksman. Hearing a painful cry made by Marichi in the fake voice of Rama at the behest of Ravana, Sita began to panic. She at once asks Lakshman to go to help Rama. Lakshman is unwilling to leave her alone in the midst of a forest. But when Sita makes sarcastic remarks, Lakshman is forced to leave Sita in the hut all alone. But before he leaves he makes a magical circle on the ground for her protection and asks her not to cross it. Lakshman was moved by Sita’s following comments –

“He perishes – well let him die!
His wife hence forth shall be mine own!
Can that thought deep imbedded lie within the heart’s most secret zone!”

The story of the Royal ascetic and the Hind is about king Bharat. It is about the failure of his matchless asceticism. The great hermit king of Saligram gave up all the luxuries at home and went out to the woods to practice penances and privations but the ascetic king become completely changed man when he developed deep love for a forlorn fawn whose thirsty deer mother died out of fear caused by a lion’s roar nearby. After the lapse of many years, Bharat was about to die but his spirit was engrossed in the worries about the little fawn.

So it devoted was his last thought Reckless of present and of failure both. The poem ends on a note that how Bharat’s conduct was a condemnation of the ideal of sacrifice but the ballad contains Toru’s personal views that this engrossment is not Maya but attachment.

Prahalad taken from the Vishnu Purana is a story of incarnation (Avatar) of Bhagvan Vishnu. The boy Prahlad is a God devotee and he opposes the tyranny of his father, king Heerun Kashyap, Heerun Kashyap is the king of demons and he did not want to hear the name of Vishnu where as Prahlad is the devotee of God Vishnu. The father tortures his son in various ways for worshipping the God. God himself appeared in the shape of half man and half lion, the Narsinh Avatar and thus kills the Tyrant king. Prahlad was made king instead of his father Kashypu and god disappeared in few moments. It was the scene when –

“One king lay stiff and stars and dead
Another on the peacock throne
Bowed reverently his youthful head”

Savitri is a story of constancy in love. Its subject deals with the victory of love and purity in thought. Savitri is a king’s daughter. She chose a poor woodcutter Satyvan as her partner despite the opposition of Naradji and her parents. It was because Satyavan was to die within a year. When the fateful day arrived, Yama, the God of Death came to take away the soul of Satyavan. Yama took away the breath and soul of Satyavan and moved lightly to his empire of Death. Savitri persistently followed him. Yama told her to go back but she replied that she must accompany her in woe or weal. There was discussion between Yama and Savitri, Savitri speaks in Vedantic Philosophy –

“I know in this transient world
All is delusion, Nothing true,
To renew, its bubble joys, be magic bond
In Maya’s network frail and fair
Is not my aim”

Hearing this, Yama was much pleased and granted her three boons, which had life of Satyavan and Immortality of their love.

Sindhu is story again form Ramayan. Sindhu or Shravana Kumar is the only child of his Sage parents. It is story of his devotion to his parents. His parents are weak, blind and helpless. He took his parents on pilgrimage and there on the way when they were thirsty he went to the river to bring water for his parents. While filling the pitcher, he was shot by an arrow of kind Dashrath who thought that some deer had been drinking water there. Sindhu was not pained by arrow, he had only one pain that what would become of his parents. Dasrath carried the Pitcher and gave water to thirst parents. Parents when hear about the death of their loved son, they gave up their lives at once. They cursed unwillingly to the king as –

“Die – for a son’s untimely loss!
Die – with a broken heart!
Now help us to our bed of moss,
And let us both depart”.

Which came to be true when Dasrath dies longing for his beloved son Ram.

The last is “Sita” which is a short piece of poem. In it we see Sita living in the hermitage of Rishi Valmiki. The picture of sad Sita along with her children deeply moves us all –

“Not in Vain
She weeps, for lo! At every tear she sheds
Tears from three pairs of young eyes fall a main
The bowed in sorrow are the three young heads”.

There three heads are of Sita and her sons Luv and Kush. The poem is rich in pathos and contains a strong autobiographical touch of her sorrows.

Conclusion:

The poems of Ancient Ballads are on the whole an attempt of true Indian Poetess. In spite of all her western training and education, Toru never ceased to be an Indian. The character portrayals of Savitri, Sita and Uma are the ideals of Indian womanhood. The male characters of the collection are also very memorable and bear high inspirational identity from our myths such as Satyavan, Lakshman, Bharat, Dhruva, Buttoo, Sindhu and Prahlad. In the words of Jha, Dutt has a rare gift of storytelling and this is seen in this collection. Fisher comments for her as, this child of the green valley of the Ganges in the great fellowship of English poet.

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