

Tracing the Cultural Cartography of Indian Memoryscape Through the Poetry of Toru Dutt and AK Ramanujan

Sushmita Pandey¹

1. Department of English and Modern European Languages, University Of Lucknow, Lucknow.

Received: 04 April 2025

Accepted: 03 June 2025

Published: 28 June 2025

Abstract

It is a poignant question especially in the contemporary times as to who are we? A question which has thrown mankind into a consistent existential dread. While the conceptualized understanding of identity in an essentialist sense is a misnomer however the general perception of identity is usually considered to be a monolith. Our cultural identities are a drifting palimpsest which keep on modifying themselves with the changing sensibilities of the times. Stuart Hall says, "Identity is always a never completed process of becoming- a process of shifting identifications, rather than a singular, complete, finished state of being." Nothing about our cultural or even national identities can be constructed in absolute terms. India has always been at the cynosure of cultural, religious and linguistic intersection since antiquity. This paper aims to study this pattern of cultural understanding through the poems of Toru Dutt and A K Ramanujan. The world is identical in this inexhaustible quest for an absolute answer to identity moorings which are sometimes self-fashioned by individuals to suit their needs and sometimes determined by the times. Our cultural practices are tiny attempts at counter precarity to the road to consolidation of identity configuration. Modern Indian individual is lost at the crossroads of a misinterpreted understanding of modernism and a false perception of tradition. The contemporary understanding of progress makes it diametrically opposed to cultural identity thus posing a compromise for the modern man. It is quite a novel situation wherein the native individuals end up exoticizing themselves from the perception of the homonormative lens of western world. The alienation that posits existential questions for the people causes cultural vacuum which then filled by a filtered understanding of native culture. Identity is not a crisis safely consigned to the indeterminable past but it is something that follows us religiously to everyday lives.

Keywords: Identity, Exoticization, Culture, Existence, Perception, Modernization, Representation, History.

1. Introduction

The case of identity study is something that turns up time and again while traversing the cultural demographics of diasporic writings. The wide range of variations of Indian sensibilities that one finds within the repertoire of Indian writers is simply exemplary. Toru Dutt successfully captures the mythical intricacy which forms an intrinsic part of the Indian imagination. In the poem Lotus one could witness the conjunction of fractured South Asian identity with that of an alien culture which has now been smelted into that of the native. The poem Lotus can also be viewed as the diverging feminine synergies contesting for locating a homogeneous identity within the psyche of the poet molded through various cultural backgrounds. The narrative presents the aesthetic strife between flowers Rose and Lily which can be respectively understood in their own right in terms of myths associated with certain goddesses. For instance, the association of red roses with the Greek goddess Juno and white Lily with that of the Greek goddess Juno the consort of Jupiter. While Flora chooses Lotus which is believed to be dear to the ancient Egyptian mother goddess Hathor, the Indian goddess of learning Saraswati, the Lotus eyed god Vishnu, the primeval father Brahma, the deity of wealth Kubera, the Mesopotamian myth as well as the Hebraic goddess Asherah, when she is forced to choose a singular flower which can be deemed unparalleled in beauty. Often mentioned in funerary and libation ceremonial descriptions Lotus has a very significant role in the

ritualistic aspect in plethora of civilizations. Lotus is a perennial aquatic flower which exhibits only one genus within two species. It is a very poignant staple within the aquatic ecosystem as well as the symbolic eco system of oriental knowledge systems since antiquity tracing its significance in places such as China, Vietnam and India. Lotus is a very poignant ritualistic feature in pharaonic ancient Egyptian civilization wherein there is one type of lotus which is referenced to in mythical conceptualization of the divine pharaohs. The symbol of blue water lily along with “an aquatic phallus,” and scarab beetle is closely associated with the mythical creation of the human race according to ancient Egyptian imagination. The water lily is often correlated to the Heliopolitan themes within Egyptian symbolism and also alludes to the resurrection myth of the god Osiris within the aquatic realm often imagined by hieroglyphs to be the eternal realm of afterlife for deceased Egyptian pharaohs in a kind of vegetative existence. According to an English translation of the Egyptian hieroglyphs titled “The Ancient Egyptian Texts” the solar cum water lily god known as Atum or Nefer-Atum arise in the sky from a “mythical islet of the Nile known as On.” This primeval “demiurge” commences the flow of life on earth as primordial comprehension of divine origin of humanity goes.

The decision of Flora to pick up the lotus hold a sense of cultural gravity by alluding to holding onto her Indian heritage while incorporating the external influences of her travels. She may also allude to the choice of learning over beauty and sensuousness reflecting the myriad of feminine sensibilities which she chooses to represent through the metric of her poetical choices. The inter textuality she provides inspires the origin of all future comparative studies within Indian literary corpus. The Goddess of love approaches Flora to reignite the interrogative spirit of the self through a rudimentary but spiritually conspicuous question. The turmoil that Toru Dutt carried within her psyche that is latent yearning for a sense of belongingness is realized through Indian myths and oral stories within her poems. The balanced confluence of multitudinous ancient myths come together to form a very complex question for the poet persona. The narrator however provides a brilliant conclusion to her lyrical masterpiece by making a very poignant choice in the form of lotus which reflects a very significant closure to the poet’s own conflicts. The rudimentary question which haunts every diasporic author may at times seem incomprehensible to the foreign eye unaccustomed to the nuances of the Indian cultural cosmos. Toru Dutt is an vivid storyteller often painting picturesque narratives lifted verbatim from a familiar Indian setting and sewing it gently into the fabric of a far-off land which resembles the land of her memory scape in nothing. Toru Dutt is way ahead of her times in her religious adherence to novelty of thoughts and reminiscences about a country she knew more through oral folktales and pages of translated history. Through her aesthetical appraisal of a culture known to the readers as inhabitants she provides a breathtaking glimpse into her extraordinary erudition and classical knowledge of European as well as Indian literary traditions. She is one of the first forerunners and the propounder of maiden feminine literary corpus in India leaving a poetic craftsmanship so unparalleled in scale as inheritance. The meticulous incorporation of the natural characteristics of India is organic in the way she fashions it almost sub consciously placing them between her suggestive pauses as easter eggs for the readers to explore and revel in the discovery.

In her poem “Our Casuarina Tree” there is a pang of looming death which mingles with the calmness that comes with the acceptance of death. The tone is nostalgic and yearning for a kind of closure when she strikes up a philosophical conversation with the tree. The imagery of nature is representative of the return of human sensibilities to its primeval state in order to gain some sort of secretive primitive wisdom which would impart a closure. The loss and suffering is unsettling due to the nature of its suddenness and its destabilizing nature which creates a chasm of unsaid emotions which shall remain suspended in a vacuum. The author says:

O sweet companions, loved with love intense,
For your sakes, shall the tree be ever dear.

Blent with your images, it shall arise
In memory, till the hot tears blind mine eyes!
What is that dirge-like murmur that I hear
Like the sea breaking on a shingle-breach?
It is tree's lament, an eerie speech,
That haply to the unknown land may reach. (Our Casuarina Tree, allpoetry.com)

Toru Dutt unravels her debilitating sense of belongingness through her words which echo an intertwined sensibility of Victorian grief and an Indian nostalgia of a forgotten land of exuberant stories. She developed and constructed a religion of her own beliefs which formed the foundations of her poetry and trickle down in her words inevitably which bestowed her with immense strength to form peace with the personal losses in her life. There have been the allegations of Toru Dutt imitating the colonial sensibilities and copiously following the imagery that had already been promulgated by the corpus of western poets and critics. There is a wide array of literary narratives within the critical academia that points to certain aspects of her poetry which may seem colonially sympathetic to a certain extent. While she does present the western influences on her imaginative prowess being heavily preoccupied with the sensibilities originating from the west, her poems do assert her divorce from the imperialistic tendencies as an Indian. She does meticulously decimate the prominent colonial narratives by re-establishing the confines of Christian imagery and the idea of the garden of Eden in her poems. Critics have also leveled charges of Dutt being a Christian proselytizer however she is sometimes both a promoter of nationalism and a critique. She also manages to subvert the feminine feud narrative in her poem "Lotus" by alluding to the confluence of the red rose and the white lily to form a lotus which neither conforms to the ideas of seductive femininity alluded to by rose or the ideals of chastity and purity represented by the white lily. Her castigation of the hegemonic literary narration is exemplary in the sense that she does it invariably at a time when the only narrative that filled the academia was the western world. Her voice tears down the colonist illusion and establishes a new Indian sensibility characterizing her nationalism as she becomes a powerful literary figure to confront for the West.

Another illustrious Indian poet who stands unparalleled in the lyrical dimension of lucid writing in Indian writing in English is AK Ramanujan. AK Ramanujan was a poet, translator, folklorist, and philologist whose works retains a very vivid sense of enigmatic regionalism that ebb from the poetic consciousness of his artistic genius. The assertiveness of Indian heritage that one comes across his poetry establishes his proud identification with his cultural roots which stems from a blend of western and Indian cultural consciousness. There is a very distinctive Indianness that one discovers in the works of AK Ramanujan as he borrows extensively from the inexhaustible repository of custom and heritage of his native landscape. The author is never given to the lures of the western values like most of his contemporaries and moreover his poems enjoy a safe distance from self-effacing structure which features consistently in many poets of his time. Tamil culture and its linguistic grandeur is somehow transferred into his works through his photographic memory which picks intriguing descriptions of the idiosyncrasies of a Tamil household whose legitimacy rests on the unapologetic nature of his interaction within the narratives. There is almost a journalistic essence to his works which are replete with brilliance of situational humor which is contained within the Indian context but retains a universal appeal. The staple of every Indian consciousness features obediently in the linguistic reservoir of the author who brings forth a new kind of English expression which is Indian in its own right as it puts forth distinctive Indian expressions unknown to the English tongue as they have been derived from the native language. The extension of the English expressive paradigm itself is Ramanujan's genius which is laced with pathos and realism as the reader as taste the laughter and grief on his tongue while traversing through his works as a traveler in his own land. The Indian never ceases to exist so does the poet even in his works of conspicuous western inspiration as the unexpected blend of the familiar joins the unfamiliar in a similar strain of sensibilities giving rise to a new kind of descriptive literary presence.

It is also noteworthy how the poet infuses sheer simplicity to pronounce the emotions within his words in a very classic fashion. The author meets the philosopher halfway through the poems when the reader contemplates whether the author is talking about something mundane or alluding to a more profound nature of discussion. The narratives are mere marionettes in the hands of the lyrical craftsman who transports the readers through the craft of his words into the realm of the other worldly fabrication he has concocted in a very believable manner. The Hindu outlook towards the machinery of life prominently emerges within his works. The personal tone is something that one comes across frequently while navigating through the poetic repertoire of AK Ramanujan. He presents the heartbreaking description of motherhood in his poem "Of Mother and other things" wherein he interrogates the institution of marriage as a rat trap wherein the women is reduced to a tokenistic synonym of sacrifice while she withers away in motherly anonymity losing the prime of her life for the sake of the family. The author alludes to his own mother who worked tirelessly and unapologetically gave up her own sense of individuality completely for the children. The subject of his anthology frequently centered round the institution of family. According to critic Partha sarathy family is one the most significant motifs which feature within the ambit of his literary writings.

In the poem "The River" the poet is melancholy as he brings out the gurgling image of a flooded river beautiful and terrifying simultaneously. The poet quietly laments the lack of literary accounts of ordinary people who were victims of natural disasters and faded unceremoniously into the abyss of oblivion while kings and socially significant figures have hegemonized the pages of chronological history. The poem also marks the underlying contemplative mood of the author who is sitting amidst the rushing waters trying to look for pieces of forgotten history of stories that were quietly buried as he questions the legitimacy of existence in a contingent world. The author presents a kind of literary realism in the following words:

The new poets still quoted
The old poets, but no one spoke
In verse
Of the pregnant woman
Drowned, with perhaps
Twins in her (A River, wetpaint.com)

The world resembles the flooded river which is pleasant and life giving providing a source of inspiration for aesthetic creativity but it shall turn into a cataclysmic force of annihilation and end all it has created. The poet is adept at painting an Indian picture which draws its source from the rustic life of rural heartland. He castigates the body of modern poets and their conspicuous lack of artistic creativity that has created a literary cul-de-sac as they keep repeating the old poets mechanically. The contemporary poets are remotely inspired to throw light on things that are relevant or give some anthropological sense of meaning to the lives of precarious lives. The author also posits the idea that the introduction of western ideology and false sense of progress and reduced the land which once inspired poets in their literary endeavors to a wasteland. The disintegration of the Indian land is approaching due to the inter reference of the mechanical influence of an alien destabilizing force which has harkened a cultural dilapidation and traditional devastation. According to AN Dwivedi:

"Indian myth and history, her people and customs, her rich cultural and spiritual heritage: these form the dominant themes of his poetry.He rather frequently resorts to native these themes and traditions."

What is intriguing in the rubrics of his works is the retention of rationalism and realism which stem from a western point of origin while discussing Indian myths and folklores indicating his unfathomable understanding of the pantheon of Indian deities, and the beliefs associated with them. The author adds to the distinctive Indian imagery from a distant observer's perspective as he views India as an array of chaotic control which flowed relentlessly through the plains of imaginative creativity. There is also the amalgamation of a certain sense of irony wherein he satirizes the social shortcomings by commenting and castigating the wrong practices and superstitions.

The poet persona emerges from the slumber of Western perception of Indian society to a new kind of perception through his own eyes to attribute a personal point of view to his native culture and beliefs.

The author gains an advantageous ground due to the distance from the native land since it infuses in him the outsider's perspective while providing him a foray into the cultural context since he is also a part of the Indian diaspora and this blend works well for his understanding of the Indian subcontinent. The author is rather ironic than poetic in his works as has been opined by critics regarding the nature of his corpus of work. The tone of his poems are caustic in their interrogation of the superstitious and regressive practices which have been sedimented into the Indian psyche. Sometimes the social commentator within his poetic consciousness joins hands with the contemplative philosopher soliloquizing the idiosyncrasies of Indian life. While critics have pointed out to the western rationalism that he employs to view the comparatively traditional life but one could observe within his lines the profoundness of comprehensive and holistic understanding of a culture which was appreciated through a more surficial or essentialist way. The reductionist purview of an India which was only a bait for tokenistic orientalism has been slowly erased to built a substantial architecture of fine cultural erudition that redefines the narrow categorization of dislocated socio-cultural contexts.

C.N. Srinath opines:

With the search for Hindu roots there is an accompaniment of the self-critical, ironic approach which brings out the inadequacies of the Hindu orthodox world to cope with the present day which realities of modern life (Srinath 29).

There is a consistent strain of tradition of oral storytelling running along western mode of narratives. There is a certain weaning that occurs regarding the illogicitics of the straight jacketed approach of orthodox religious life in India within which a plethora of obscure practices have been sedimented over time and their prosperity has only burgeoned. The author is able to provide a bird eye view of the Indian conception of religion, man-woman dynamics, tradition, motherhood, nostalgia, nature and human life among other things. The author's incessant insistence on the profundity of the subject of the poem is starkly reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's approach towards poetry who advised poets to put the subject at the cynosure of aspects while constructing a poetical creation. The author discards the ritualistic essentialism of Hindu life for the philosophical spiritualism. Although critics point out the obscure strain of ruthlessness in his criticism of India and the culture as being influenced by the corpus of non-Indian thought, his appreciation for India shines through his works. Nevertheless, one can still see a very powerful sense of disillusionment regarding the ritualistic nature of Indian life and particularly Hindu life which he castigates in his works. The intricacy of the indigenous culture in its labyrinthic intricacy is even incomprehensible to the native psyche and therefore even with all its logistical criticisms, the unadulterated locus of the cultural corpus with its pantheon of deities, plethora of belief systems, diverse intersection of traditional practices and claim to substantial space in historical antiquity still remains unappreciatively enigmatic.

2. References

- Dar, F. B. (2016). The poetry of Toru Dutt with special reference to her Indian thoughts. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies*, 3(3).
- Dwivedi, A. N. (1995). *The poetic art of A.K. Ramanujan*. New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.
- Dutt, T. (1878). *A sheaf gleaned in French fields*. India: B.M. Bose, at the Saptahik Sambad Press.
- Govindarajan, M. (2019). A.K. Ramanujan's ironical vision of Hindu's life: A confrontation between Eastern wisdom and Western skepticism. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, 6(3). <http://www.jetir.org>

- McDonald, A. (2018). Influences of Egyptian lotus symbolism and ritualistic practices on sacral tree worship in the Fertile Crescent from 1500 BCE to 200 CE. In *Religion, Ritual and Ritualistic Objects*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9090256>
- Parthasarathy, R. (1977). How it strikes a contemporary: The poetry of A.K. Ramanujan. *Osmania Journal of English Studies, Contemporary Indian Poetry in English Special*, 197–201.
- Philips, N. A. (2007). Claiming her own context(s): Strategic singularity in the poetry of Toru Dutt. *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 3 (Winter). <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue33/phillips.html>
- Ramanujan, A. K. (n.d.). A river. Retrieved September 10, 2011, from http://poeticwetpaint.com/.../Explanation_of_poem_river_written_by_a.k.ramanujan
- Elements of composition. (n.d.). Retrieved September 10, 2011, from <http://soundarya.wordpress.com/.../Indian-poetry-theelements-of-composite>
- Love poem for a wife 1. (n.d.). Retrieved September 12, 2011, from https://books.google.com/books/...The_poetry_of_A_K_Ramanujan
- Obituary. (n.d.). Retrieved September 10, 2011, from <http://english.emory.edu/Bahri/Ramanujan.html>
- Of mothers among other things. (n.d.). Retrieved September 12, 2011, from <http://verseflow.blogspot.com/2007/10/ofmother-among-other-things.html>
- Prayers to Murugan. (n.d.). Retrieved September 12, 2011, from https://allpoetry.com/poem/8613973-Prayers_To_Lord_Murugan-by-A.K.
- Ramanujan, A. K. (1995). *Collected poems of A.K. Ramanujan* (Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Singh, M. (2018). The importance of familial relations in A.K. Ramanujan's poetry. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 6(1). <http://www.ijcrt.org>
- Suri, S. (2017). The essence of Indianness in the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan. *International Education and Research Journal*, 3(3).
- Trivedi, R. (2022). A.K. Ramanujan: A leading Indo-Anglican poet. *The Creative Launcher*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2022.7.2.15>
- Yamini, G. (2015). Dislocation and diasporic consciousness in poetry of Meena Alexander. *Asia Pacific Journal of Research*, 1(25). <http://apjor.com/downloads/0205201519>

Corresponding Author:

Sushmita Pandey

Department of English and Modern European Languages,
University Of Lucknow, Lucknow.