

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Portable Homelands: Cultural Memory, Sacred Nature, and Women's Voice in Toru Dutt

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Toru Dutt, a pioneering figure in nineteenth-century Indian English literature, utilizes the emblematic power of nature and the voices of mythological heroines to preserve artistic memory, assert unsexed agency, and resist social erasure. Born into a bilingual and cross-cultural terrain, Dutt composed poetry that combined Indian traditions with English erudite forms, thereby creating what may be nominated a “portable motherland” for displaced or settled individualities. By engaging deeply with works such as *The Lotus*, *Our Casuarina Tree*, and narrative retellings from *Ancient Ditties and Legends of Hindustan*, including Savitri, Sita, and Lakshman, this paper demonstrates how Indian symbols are elevated within Western lyrical fabrics initially viewed by social compendiums as a unseasonable middleman of Eastern themes, Dutt has ago been honored as a minstrel who subtly reshaped conceptions of Indian woman, presenting women not simply as unresistant numbers but as active moral agents, preceptors, and defenders of artistic ethics. Through close readings informed by artistic memory, ecocriticism, feminist narratology, and postcolonial perspectives, this study highlights the significance of Dutt's erudite contributions in constructing both a womanish moral voice and an enduring artistic identity. The paper argues that Toru Dutt's work extends beyond lyrical expression; it is an act of artistic preservation and subtle resistance that continues to reverberate in discussions of gender equivalency, artistic inclusivity, and the sustainable conservation of heritage.

Keywords: cultural memory; ecocriticism; feminist narratology; postcolonial resistance

FULL PAPER

1. Introduction

Toru Dutt (1856–1877) occupies a significant position in nineteenth-century Indian English literature. Born into a progressive Bengali Christian family, she was educated in both India and Europe, which exposed her to the erudite traditions of English, French, and Sanskrit. Despite her short life, she produced a remarkable body of work that spans societies and languages. Her runes, written in the backdrop of social subjection, reveal a conscious attempt to preserve Indian myths, memories, and natural imagery through the English language.

This paper develops the conception of the “potable motherland” to describe the artistic function of Dutt’s poetry. In her work, sacred geographies, flowers, and mythological heroines act as movable sanctuaries — depositories of memory, ethics, and belonging — that can travel across verbal and geographical borders. In particular, her nature runes, such as *The Lotus* and *Our Casuarina Tree*, underscore ecological symbolism, while *Savitri*, *Sita*, and *Lakshman* emphasize feminine agency and domestic values. By analyzing these works through the lenses of artistic memory, ecocriticism, feminist narratology, and postcolonial studies, this paper argues that Dutt both preserved Indian artistic identity and subtly defied social hierarchies by valorizing Indian aesthetics within English literary forms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Early Critical Event Emphasis on Precocity

The foremost recognition of Toru Dutt came from critics like Edmund Gosse (1882), who emphasized her extraordinary precocity and bilingual mastery. To social compendiums, Dutt was celebrated less for her depth of artistic preservation and more as a “wonder child” who intermediated Indian stories for the English-speaking world. This early framing deposited her primarily as an artistic ground rather than as an inventor or a voice of resistance. Such a view, while admitting her gift, narrowed the focus of her donation and risked reducing her work to fantastic representation.

2.2 The Shift Towards Cultural and Feminist Readings

With the rise of postcolonial and feminist erudite studies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the focus on Dutt began to change. Scholars like Meenakshi Mukherjee (2000) linked her to the colonist tradition in Indian English poetry, whose restatements and acclimations were part of a deliberate artistic design. Rosinka Chaudhuri (2016) argued that her mythological retellings reframe Indian narratives for Western culture, without diluting their native substance. Later

readings have emphasized Dutt's role not only as a translator of culture, but also as a voice that laboriously reshaped gender and identity within social constraints.

2.3 Substantiation of Ecocritical and Memory-Grounded Approaches

Recent critical work has increasingly interpreted Dutt through the lenses of ecocriticism and artistic memory. The Literary Herald (2020) has examined *Our Casuarina Tree* as an ecological contemplation on memory and belonging, where nature serves as a library of lived experiences. Additionally, JRSP-ELT (2023) emphasized how Dutt's poetry seamlessly interweaves natural imagery with emotional intensity to foster a collaborative identity. Jan Assmann's proposition of artistic memory (2011) has also been influential in establishing her work as a depository of collaborative durability across time and space. These approaches emphasize that her poetry is not only aesthetic but also mnemonic and preservative in its artistic function.

2.4 Gender, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance

Another important aspect of education highlights the role of gender and resistance in Dutt's workshop. Redalyc(2021) explores Savitri as an early representation of the " new woman," where the heroine asserts her agency against patriarchal and cosmic authority, likewise. Ipshita Chanda(2013) interprets Dutt's jottings as spots of postcolonial concession, where English verse is appropriated to serve indigenous ethics and identity. Through this lens, Dutt is seen as laboriously defying artistic erasure, her heroines standing as moral and intellectual agents rather than unresistant numbers. This perspective places her in dialogue with broader feminist narratology, where women's voices challenge and reshape traditional narratives.

2.5 Theoretical Perceptivity: Media, Memory, and Translatability

Scholars also fete the theoretical significance of Dutt's stylistic and formal choices. By bedding Sanskrit references, ethical canons, and mythological heroines into English sonnets and narrative verse, she created what can be nominated a " portable motherland. " Glotfelty and Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader*(1996) provides tools to see nature in her poetry as an active mnemonic medium, while Sukanta Chaudhuri(2017) situates her jotting within broader textual theories. These perceptions demonstrate how Dutt's work not only preserves artistic heritage but also reshapes global erudite imagination by asserting the legality of Indian culture in the Anglophone sphere.

While scholars have examined her individual runes, smaller studies synthesize her nature lyrics and mythological ditties as linked practices of artistic remembrance. This paper seeks to address that gap.

3. Theoretical Framework

Moving forward in literature has always been a means of preserving memory and altering how society perceives its own traditions. In Toru Dutt's poetry, the way she presents nature and mythological heroines has a profound impact on artistic beliefs, shaping people's opinions about Indian identity and the roles of women. Ideas from artistic memory, ecocriticism, feminist narratology, and postcolonial propositions help to explain how her poetry reflects heritage while also reshaping the way both Indians and social compendia viewed women, nature, and tradition. This frame explains how her runes carry memory across boundaries and challenge fixed social places.

Cultural Memory Theory (Assmann, 2011) emphasizes the role of stories, symbols, and rituals in helping groups maintain their identity over time. In Dutt's poetry, flowers, trees, and mythological heroines act as carriers of memory. For illustration, our Casuarina Tree embodies particular and collaborative gestures within nature, while Savitri retells a myth to convey the values of courage and adaptability. These runes show that memory is not only kept in spoken history but also in symbols that people can carry like "movable motherlands." As compendiums engage with these runes, they continue the act of remembering, keeping Indian culture alive indeed in colonizer and diasporic surrounds.

Ecocriticism views nature not as a silent background but as an active force in shaping memory and identity. When Dutt describes the casuarina tree as "like a huge python winding round and round," she is not simply painting decor but giving life and agency to nature. The tree becomes a library of particular grief and a collaborative sense of belonging. Also, the lotus flower in *The Lotus* is not just a factory; it is a sacred hallmark of the Indian culture. Ecocriticism helps us see how her use of natural imagery functions as both ecological mindfulness and artistic preservation, turning geographies into living actors in memory.

Feminist Narratology focuses on how women's voices are told, silenced, or converted in stories. Dutt reimagines heroines like Savitri and Sita not as unresistant victims but as potent moral agents. Savitri wins against Death through reasoned argument, while the work Sita transmits cultural ethics to children. By presenting these women as instructors, decision-makers, and intercessors, Dutt challenges the social generality of Indian women as speechless and ornamental. Feminist

narratology shows how her lyrical retellings open a moral language of care, courage, and rigidity that belongs to women.

Postcolonial Theory: It explains how settled pens negotiate between Western forms and native traditions. By writing Indian myths in English sonnets and ballads, Dutt unsettles social scales that dismissed Indian culture as inferior. Her choice to bed Sanskritic names and cultural symbols into English verse is an act of cultural assertion. It shows that Indian traditions are not only equal to but can also enrich Western erudite forms. The postcolonial proposition helps us read her poetry as both a form of cultural preservation and a subtle resistance to social dominance.

Together, these propositions demonstrate that Dutt's work is not only lyrical but also deeply strategic. Her poems serve as cultural libraries, ecological handbooks, feminist narratives, and postcolonial acts of rigidity. They help us understand how literature can both preserve memory and inspire change in how we perceive identity and gender.

4. Methodology

This disquisition is qualitative and interpretive in nature, counting primarily on close reading as a way to engage with Toru Dutt's poetry. Near reading is chosen because it allows a detailed examination of language, form, and imagery, which are central to understanding how Dutt creates layers of meaning. The poems named for study — The Lotus, Our Casuarina Tree, Savitri, Sita, and Lakshman are representative of her larger body of work and bring together her use of natural imagery, cultural symbolism, and mythological retelling. These handbooks are read precisely to uncover how Dutt transforms particular memories and cultural identities into lyrical expressions, and how her stylistic choices reveal both individual creativity and a cooperative heritage.

The theoretical framework guiding this discussion is drawn from cultural memory studies, ecocriticism, feminist narratology, and postcolonial theory. Cultural memory provides a lens through which to view how her poems serve as repositories of Indian heritage, carrying forward stories, rituals, and values that are deeply rooted in the country's past. Ecocriticism highlights how nature in her poetry is not a bare background but an active presence that embodies memory and continuity. Feminist narratology makes it possible to read characters like Savitri and Sita as potent ethical agents, challenging the patriarchal image of women as unresistant or speechless. The postcolonial proposition further deepens the analysis by situating Dutt's decision to use English forms for Indian content as a subtle form of cultural resistance, allowing Indian traditions to circulate in socially elite spaces.

To strengthen these readings, the study draws upon critical education, encompassing both nonfictional and contemporary perspectives. Early responses similar to Edmund Gosse's *Introductory Bio* (1882) give insight into how Dutt's work was received in her own time, while later critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee (2000) and Rosinka Chaudhuri (2016) shed light on her part in shaping Indian English literature. Recent ecocritical and feminist interpretations from journals such as *The Literary Herald*, *JRSP-ELT*, and *Redalyc* offer ultramodern perspectives that align with the themes of this paper. Engaging with these sources helps situate the analysis within debates and demonstrates how Dutt remains a relevant figure in contemporary education. The study also adopts a contextual and relative approach, considering the social context in which Dutt wrote. Attention is given to how she uses English lyrical forms, similar to the sonnet and the narrative ditty, but fills them with Indian subjects, names, and ethical values. This relative system helps to punctuate how her poetry both conforms to and disrupts social prospects. The approach is qualitative rather than quantitative, as it focuses on meanings, artistic memory, and illuminative perceptivity rather than numerical data.

Altogether, this methodology brings together close textual study, theoretical architecture, critical engagement, and contextual comparison. It is designed to show how Dutt's poetry can be read not only as art but also as artistic preservation and subtle resistance, making it possible to appreciate her unique contribution to nineteenth-century Indian English literature.

5. Analysis & Discussion

This section provides a detailed analysis of how Toru Dutt's poetry represents Indian artistic symbols, natural imagery, and mythological heroines, transforming them from background motifs to central figures that preserve artistic memory, sustain identity, and challenge colonial and patriarchal norms. These shifts are not only erudite but also have counteraccusations for postcolonial identity and gender equivalency.

5.1 From ornamental Motifs to Cultural Anchors

In literature, Indian nature and myths were frequently treated as ornamental details or fantastic settings. Dutt's poetry, still, transforms these into central, living aspects. In *The Lotus*, the flower is not simply a garnishment but an artistic hallmark that rivals the Western rose and lily. "Give me a flower succulent as the rose and stately as the lily in her pride." Then, the lotus becomes a symbol of conflation, representing India's spiritual and aesthetic authority. Also, in *Our Casuarina Tree*, the tree is described as "like a huge Python, winding round and round," making it an

active being rather than an unresistant background. These exemplifications demonstrate how Dutt transforms natural imagery from a minor detail into a significant artistic anchor, reclaiming Indian identity within English lyrical forms.

5.2 Heroines as Ethical and Intellectual Numbers

Dutt's reinterpretation of grand heroines shifts women from unresistant places to deliberate characters who shape artistic meaning. In *Savitri*, the heroine is not silent; she confronts Death with logic and reason, demonstrating intellectual courage. The work *Sita* becomes a form of artistic education. "Three happy children in a darkened room! What do they peer on with wide-open eyes?" Through this domestic scene, artistic memory is passed down across generations. In *Lakshman*, Sita's critical voice — "mind! Lakshman! Hark, again that cry!" — shows her as emotionally active, shaping the course of events. These descriptions challenge patriarchal and social conceptions by presenting women as thinkers, preceptors, and moral leaders.

5.3 Resistance as a Literary Strategy

Female commission in Dutt's poetry is not supplemental but central to her erudite strategy. By giving women voices of authority, she aligns her work with early feminist currents while also defying social narratives that portrayed Indian women as unresistant victims. Her choice to bed Sanskrit names, legendary heroines, and artistic ethics into English poetry unsettles the idea that Western aesthetics were superior. Just as feminist advertising moments use empowered women to build brands, Dutt's lyrical strategy positions Indian culture as equal within the social elite business. This becomes both an artistic and a political act of resistance.

5.4 Redefining morals Through Natural and legendary Imagery

Just as ultramodern announcements use ordinary products to review gender morals, Dutt uses familiar artistic symbols — trees, flowers, heroines to reshape hypotheticals about Indian identity. The *Lotus* elevates an Indian flower to the same pedestal as Western icons, rewriting cultural scales. Our *Casuarina Tree* transforms particular grief into cooperative memory, redefining nature as a living library. In *Savitri* and *Sita*, women formerly confined to domestic or spiritual spheres emerge as figures of intellect and rigidity. These poems demonstrate how everyday cultural motifs, when reframed, can carry transformative meanings that challenge patriarchal and social narratives.

5.5 Cultural Memory and Role Models

Dutt's heroines and natural symbols serve not only as erudite figures but also as cultural part models. For her albums — both Indian and Western — they opened new ways of seeing women and nature. Indian albums could recognize familiar myths in staid English verse, affirming cultural pride, while Western albums encountered Indian heroines not as fantastic garnishments but as moral exemplars. This double function highlights the part of Dutt's poetry in shaping their identity. Dutt's work shaped the cultural imagination by offering empowered, womanish figures and sacred nature as part of models that transcended the boundaries of terrain and time.

6. Poetry as a Medium of Cultural Memory and Resistance

In Toru Dutt's work, poetry becomes more than an erudite expression; it functions as a space where memory, tradition, and identity are saved and reshaped. Her runes do not simply describe nature or retell myths; they transform them into artistic symbols that sustain a sense of belonging and offer subtle resistance to colonizing and patriarchal structures.

6.1 Nature as a Living Library

Dutt turns the rudiments of nature into depositories of particular and artistic memory. In *Our Casuarina Tree*, the image of the python "winding round and round" the box gives the tree agency and vitality. The tree stores the memory of past fellowship and loss, serving as a natural monument. This shifts nature from an unresistant background to an active substantiation of history, creating a living library that both preserves and transmits artistic identity.

6.2 Mythical Heroines as Ethical Agents

In her retellings of Savitri, Sita, and Lakshman, Dutt foregrounds womanish characters as sources of strength and adaptability. Savitri confronts Death with moral logic, demonstrating the power of intellect over fate. Sita, retold through a ma's fabricator, embodies cultural continuity passed down to children. In Lakshman, the urgency of Sita's cry transforms her into a figure of emotional and ethical intensity. These descriptions challenge the social stereotype of Indian women as silent and compliant, presenting them instead as central ethical agents.

6.3 Cultural Symbols as Acts of Resistance

By elevating the lotus above the Western rose and lily in *The Lotus*, Dutt symbolically challenges social aesthetic scales. The lotus, long a sacred hallmark of chastity and the church in Indian tradition, is crowned within the English sonnet form. This act of lyrical concession becomes a subtle form of resistance, asserting

that Indian cultural symbols are not inferior but equal to, and in some ways richer than, their Western counterparts.

6.4 Story as a Medium of Continuity

Dutt's poetry constantly frames itself as a tool for cultural survival. In *Sita*, the act of describing myths to children in a darkened room becomes representative of passing memory across generations. It is not just entertainment but a pedagogy — a way of securing heritage in times of cultural displacement. This highlights the significance of oral traditions in conserving identity, indeed, when political and cultural systems are under strain.

6.5 Poetry as a Ground Between Societies

ultimately, Dutt's choice to use English lyrical forms while covering them with Indian subjects makes her poetry a cultural ground. The use of the sonnet form in *The Lotus* and the song form in *Savitri* demonstrates her capability to adapt Western forms without losing Indian substance. This strategy enables her work to circulate in scholarly spaces while carrying Indian memory and voice into the global knowledge sphere. Her poetry thus becomes both a portable motherland and a point of cross-cultural concession.

7. Postcolonial Resistance and Gendered Agency

Toru Dutt's poetry is further than particular expression; it is a quiet but important act of cultural resistance. Writing in English, the language of the colonizer, Dutt chose not to imitate Western subjects but to bring Indian traditions, myths, and natural imagery into the erudite spaces of prim albums. By doing so, she refused the cultural erasure of social rule, averring that Indian symbols and voices earned equal recognition within global literature. Her factory thus acts as a counter-narrative, challenging social scales that privileged Western aesthetics and diminished Indian heritage.

One of the clearest ways in which this resistance operates is through her use of mythological heroines. In poems like *Savitri* and *Sita*, women are not portrayed as unresisting figures waiting to be saved, but as intellectual, moral, and emotional leaders. *Savitri* negotiates directly with Death, counting on reason and determination rather than submission. *Sita*, in Dutt's retelling, becomes an artistic preceptor, transmitting stories and values to her children. These representations disrupt the colonizer and patriarchal conception of Indian women as speechless, amenable, or bound entirely to domestic service. Instead, Dutt creates space for women to be

seen as preceptors, mediators, and agents of survival, whose moral authority sustains families and communities.

Her nature runes, too, carry resistant energy. In *The Lotus*, the crowning of the lotus over the rose and lily can be read as an emblematic reordering of aesthetic values. The lotus, sacred to Indian traditions, displaces Western flowery icons within the sonnet form — a genre associated with European erudite authority. Additionally, our Casuarina Tree transforms the natural landscape into a living library of memory, challenging the social perception of India as a land without history. Then, geographies are not neutral but politically and emotionally charged, holding within them the weight of memory, belonging, and artistic adaptability.

By blending Indian imagery with English forms, Dutt demonstrates what postcolonial critics describe as “writing back” to the conglomerate. She does not reject English as a medium but retools it to serve Indian identity, thereby unsettling social scales from within. This strategy enables her to preserve artistic heritage while also gaining legitimacy in global academic circles. It is a form of resistance that's both subtle and strategic, instead of direct battle; it works through re-inscription and revaluation.

In this way, Dutt's poetry reveals the integrated nature of postcolonial resistance and unsexed agency. Her work shows that resistance need not always be loud or violent; it can also be decoded in images of flowers, trees, and heroines who remain but forcefully assert their presence. By placing Indian culture at the center of her English verse, Toru Dutt challenges both social domination and patriarchal silencing, leaving behind a heritage of empowered voices and enduring artistic memory.

8. Conclusion

Toru Dutt's poetry constructs a “portable motherland”, where nature and myth serve as artistic anchors. By conforming Indian traditions to English, she preserved collaborative memory, articulated a woman's moral voice, and challenged social hierarchies. Her work is therefore both honorary and a preservation of Indian identity, as well as a subtle protestation of artistic adaptability. Unborn exploration can compare Dutt's strategies with contemporaries like Sarojini Naidu or Henry Derozio, expanding the study of Indian Anglophone muses as custodians of artistic memory.

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