

## SHORT STORY

# Allan Poe's Cat

NASRIN JAHAN (translated by Asrar Chowdhury)

'Krishna Kali is what I call her'... dry leaves rustle restlessly in the wind beneath the disordered tamaris groves... seated within its slender gaps, the boy touches the girl's shaded cheek with his startlingly white fingers...

Thank Heavens Rabinranath Tagore rescued dark-coloured girls somewhat... I mean, sitting beside you when the colour of my skin starts to gnaw at me... the girl says in an indistinct voice, then at that very moment listening to that line coming out of your mouth unleashes a white firestream in my blood. Over their heads a strong sun blazes away.

Getting down from the rickshaw, the boy says, This time it's firm, I'll come to your house tomorrow.

Such a scorching day! Fire, feeling like it is tearing water out of the girl's skin with bare teeth. But unmindful about it, because of the fragrance coming from the boy she has recently fallen in love with, the girl enters the house after crossing through the alley. Only then does the thought occur to her and she slaps her forehead. She sternly rebukes herself!

She's been in a swoon, swimming trance-like in a drunken river and now the world asserts itself, crash-landing into reality's space. It is a working day, with everybody in the house having gone out to do his or her own work.

She frequently keeps making this same mistake nowadays when she enters her room. She tosses her bag, forgets everything and then pitches forward face-down on the bed. Previously, she would have turned the house upside down if she didn't see the cat at her doorstep. The cat too out of some wounded pride doesn't wait by the door these days, doesn't meow anymore.

Hearing the scratching of claws on the floor, the girl with a start of violent guilt jumps up to scoop up the cat on her lap... Hey...hey... she tickles the cat. So, you are not feeling happy, not feeling happy at all eh? So what do I have to do, ask about you all the time?

The girl's lips are desolate, and on hearing the soft sounds, the cat gradually calms down. Some unknown, strange sensation sends a shiver running through its black fur... after turning and twisting a few times it sits down and looks at the girl with gravid, solemn eyes.

'My skin colour and yours, they are so much alike,' the girl murmurs as she sinks back down on the bed. A striped cat had paired off with this tomcat, and then one fine morning had run off with a gorgeous white cat. This poor cat then had nearly scratched itself to death.

After this incident, the girl now pays far more attention to the cat. They eat together... they sleep together... she talks to the cat constantly... the girl thinks, How lonely had I been when the boy hadn't entered my life... and this cat then had been my companion at every moment, at every turn.

If you were a woman, I'd have called you Krishna Kali... the girl laughs out loud, melting into the deep romance flowing beneath the laughter as she runs her fingers through the cat's fur, strokes and kisses the cat...again, that strange, unknown shiver runs through the cat.

Okay, you ready? Let me change, and then let's go to the roof.

The sun's rays still fall. The cat sweetly, softly bites at the edge of the girl's salwar. Up here on the roof through the crevices of a thousand buildings a piece of the sky slides downward. Standing in the midst of all this, the girl looks at the amazing clouds and feels



contented... Hey hey, cloud...dissolve into fragments over his curly hair wherever he is standing and make it wet.

The cat is running around in great spirits. Then, to get the girl's attention it slowly pads over to the railing and sits on it. 'Araay araay, you're going to fall off, the girl in one motion picks up the cat and holding it against her bosom lies down on the roof. Do you think often about your lover? Feel bad? The very next moment the girl feels a deep anxiety... the cat can't tolerate anything white... when just the other day a fair-skinned girlfriend of hers came to visit, it would be quite correct to say that it had veritably sprung out her.

However, ultimately the cat had behaved itself, leashed by its mistress's strict control. Perhaps there would be trouble at the beginning with the boy, but then the girl would eventually reconcile them both to each other, make them friends. The next day, again everybody has gone out of the house. After getting the maidservant to take the cat to some other place, the girl stands sweating in the small space in front of the boy. They are alone in the room. A surprising calm about the boy, telling her stories about his childhood while playing with the girl's fingers, telling her 'You know what happens, I was an only child, grew up feeling very lonely, both parents at work, coming to you I feel

comforted.

The girl puts out the spark of fire that makes its way up her ice-cold heart, and says in a soft voice, That's what I fear the most, this dark-skinned girl for their one, good-looking son, will your family...?

What are you calling good-looking? This fair colour? Oh, God! Do you know how beautiful you are? Saying this, the boy very tenderly joins his body with the girl's and passionately kisses her on the lips.

There is a sudden sound and the girl draws away, only to see the silent, cold eyes of the cat staring at them from a gap in the window.

Late at night when the girl is sleeping with the cat in her arms, climbing stairways of clouds in her dreams, she feels that the cat has moved away from her.

What's up? Where are you going? She turns on the lights and follows the cat, and she enters inside the kitchen, she is rendered speechless. In a split second, the cat has jumped on to the blade of the standing boti, and its blood-soaked body is now lying dead on the floor.

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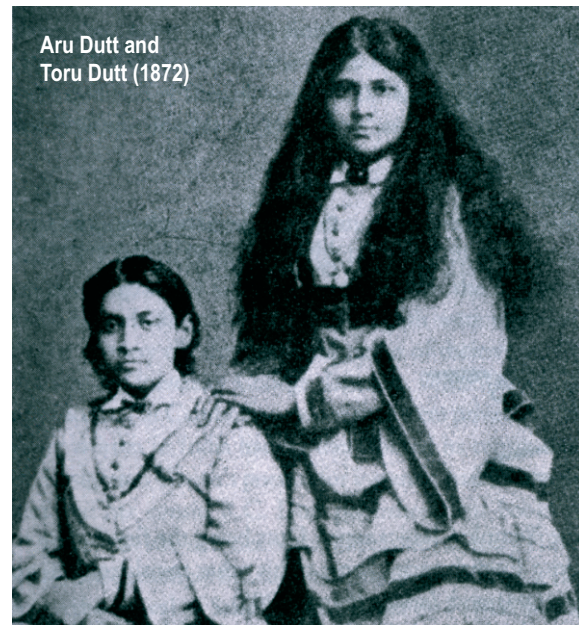
# Introducing South Asian Poetry in English: Toru Dutt

KAISER HAQ

At least one eyebrow was raised at my characterization of Toru Dutt (4 March 1856-30 August 1977) as a genius in the previous article in this series I can well appreciate such skepticism, for our lexical currency has suffered worse inflation than our humble monetary unit. It is a common experience to find diverse personages, from rote-learning schoolboys to pompous mediocrities, being touted as geniuses. So let me make it absolutely clear on what sort of achievement I have based my claim.

A Bengali girl born in Kolkata in the heyday of Empire masters French and English and acquires a fair amount of German, Latin and Sanskrit as well, and before being snuffed out by consumption at the age of twenty-one, produces the following: an anthology of English translations of 165 nineteenth century French poems, *A Sheaf Gathered in French Fields* (1876); a complete novel in French, *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* (Paris: Didier 1879); a collection of poems derived mainly from Sanskrit sources, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (London: Kegan Paul 1882); an incomplete English novel, *Bianca*; a few translations from the French sonnets of the Comte de Gramont; a few critical essays (published in the *Bengal Magazine*). Critics like Edmund Gosse and E. J. Thompson enthusiastically receive the English verse collections, and eminent French men of letters wax eloquent over the French novel. Some of the greatest names in literature are invoked to indicate both the precocity and potential of Toru Dutt. E. J. Thompson declares her "one of the most astonishing women that ever lived, a woman whose place is with Sappho and Emily Brontë, fiery and unconquerable of soul as they." The *Saturday Review* (London, August 23, 1879) avers: "Toru Dutt was one of the most remarkable women that ever lived. Had George Sand or George Eliot died at the age of twenty-one, they would certainly not have left behind them any proof of application or originality superior to those bequeathed us by Toru Dutt; and we discover little of merely ephemeral precocity in the attainments of this singular girl." And Gosse, introducing *Ballads of Hindustan*, notes that "Within the brief space of four years which now divides us from the date of her decease, her genius has been revealed to the world under many phases, and has been recognized throughout France and England."

I might well highlight the word "genius" above and exclaim, *Quod erat*



demonstrandum! But I am aware that modern sceptics are scornful of the effusions of eminent Victorians. It will be pertinent therefore to cite modern opinion. Leading contemporary (i.e., post-Partition) Indian English poets have been generally dismissive of their predecessors, except for Toru Dutt. The poet Parthasarathy, for instance, in introducing his anthology, *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*, singles out Toru, from among the entire tribe of nineteenth century anglophone versifiers, as "the only one who had talent," and with 'an undisputed claim to be regarded as the first Indian poet in English.' Rosinka Chaudhuri, who has recently published the most comprehensive critical study of the subject, *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002), rightly credits her with having transcended the rigid Orientalist conventions that straitjacket her predecessors, "as the language she uses transforms the mythological content in her poems with their individual, and essentially modern, voice. Her modernism is evident from the way the mythological content of her poems does not remain extrinsic to her work as in the case of her predecessors, but is internalized in a consciousness that she both invokes and interrogates as she creates her own style."

Thus, in "Savitri," the mythic past is contrasted with a degenerate present: "In those far-off primeval days/ Fair India's daughters were not pent! In closed/

zenanas." Feminist critics like Susia Tharu have shown that Savitri is one of a series depicted by late nineteenth century Indian poets (Sarojini Naidu and Aurobindo Ghose were prominent among the others) aimed at projecting her as an Indian heroine par excellence, possessing a dual aspect—chaste Victorian on the one hand, and on the other a redeemer of her nation (personified in her hapless spouse Satyavan).

More of a poetic advance is exemplified in "Sita," which instead of simply narrating the traditional tale focuses on the familial scene where it is retold by a mother to her three children. The whole poem is reprinted alongside so that readers may fully appreciate the charming drama of storytelling. A point worth adding—that Rosinka Chaudhuri seems to have missed—is the prosodic innovativeness of the poem. This aspect of Toru's verse was noted, albeit unappreciatively, by Gosse, who complained, apropos of the translations from French poetry, that "exquisite" as some of them are, at times "the rules of our prosody are absolutely ignored, and it is obvious that the Hindu poetess was chanting to herself a music that is discord in an English ear." Even the *Ballads of Hindustan* that Gosse considered "Toru's chief legacy to posterity" contained "much . . . that is rough and inchoate." To my postcolonial ear, what Gosse found discordant appears as an attempt—unconscious no doubt—to escape from the straitjacket of conventional metrics and find an Indian voice. "Sita" seems to be notably successful in this regard. Its twenty-two decasyllabic lines include only one regular iambic pentameter. Half the lines contain two or three variant feet. Of a total of 110 metrical feet, as I would scan them, seventy-five are iambs, eighteen are pyrrhic, ten trochaic and seven spondaic. The overall effect is a subtly cadenced poem in which the prosodic liberties taken are balanced by the formal control of a neat rhyme scheme.

Toru's translations from French, unsurprisingly, show a fondness for the Romantic (Victor Hugo et al), but it is quite extraordinary that her taste is catholic enough to embrace such precursors of modernism as Gerard de Nerval and Theophile Gautier, and the father of modernism himself: the two poems of

Baudelaire she has included must be among the earliest to be translated into English. The Victorian idiom she uses may read quaintly, but not so the notes she has appended to the volume; their crisp prose and tone of quiet authority will continue to impress readers. Witness the note on Baudelaire, which, curiously enough, makes an interesting critical point by referring to a poem other than the two she has translated:

*Sonnet.—The Broken Bell.* Charles Baudelaire, the author of this sonnet, is a poet and critic of considerable eminence; but he borrows, without acknowledgment, too much from English and German sources. Look for instance at a little piece of his, entitled 'Le Guignon,' consisting of fourteen lines,—not put in the legitimate form of the sonnet. First you find the line, 'L'art est long et le temps est court.'

Well! say, 'Art is long and time is fleeting' is a proverbial expression, and Baudelaire has as much right to use it as Longfellow, but then come the lines—

'Mon cœur comme un tambour voilé  
Va battant des marches funèbres.'

Does not that remind one rather too strongly of Longfellow's

'And our hearts, tough true and brave,  
Still like muffled drums are beating,  
Funeral marches to the grave?'

Still it turns to a question of dates. Both of them are living poets. Who wrote his lines first? But there is assuredly no question of dates, or question of any kind whatever, immediately after, when you find,

'Maint joyau dort enseveli  
Dans les ténèbres et l'oublie  
Bien loin des pioches et des sondes;  
Mainte fleur épanchée a regret,  
Son parfum doux comme un secret,  
Dans less solitudes profondes.'

Can anybody render into French verse, more literally, Gray's beautiful but hackneyed lines,

'Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air?'

Charles Baudelaire died only a short time ago.

Such finely controlled prose, from the pen

of a nineteen-year-old is even more precocious than the verse translations. The external cause of such maturity was doubtless the Dutt's European sojourn, which had a tremendous educative influence on Toru and her elder sister Aru. In 1869, when the family set sail for Europe, the children had already received an excellent grounding in literature and music from private tutors as well as their parents. The Dutt's stopped for several months at Nice where the two sisters went to school and fell in love with the French language. Then, after a long halt in Paris, they arrived in London in the spring of 1870. It was here that Toru began writing in earnest. Cousin Romesh Chunder Dutt, then in London to prepare for the civil service, recalled spending "many pleasant hours with my young cousins" and noted that "literary work and religious studies were still the sole occupation of Govin Chunder and his family." There was musical education too, as Toru's letters indicate—several hours daily on the piano plus singing lessons to develop their clear contralto voices" (Dutt père's description). Their social life was busy too, and even productive of the kind of anecdote that acquires literary value. Lord Lawrence, who had lately been Viceroy in India, called on them and finding Aru reading a novel commented chidingly, "Ah! you should not read novels too much, you should read histories." Toru replied for her sister: "We like to read novels." Lord Lawrence exclaimed, "Why!" Whereupon Toru smilingly aphorized with a paradox worthy of Wilde, "Because novels are true, and histories are false."

The swift collapse of the French in the war with Prussia was distressing to the Dutt's, especially to Toru, who was provoked into a poetic protest in "1870", subsequently included among the miscellanies concluding the *Ballads of Hindustan*: "Not dead,—oh no,—she cannot die! Only a swoon, from loss of blood!" Her indignation didn't spare England either: "Levite England passe her bys/ Help, Samaritan! None is sigh."

The following year the Dutt's went to Cambridge where Toru and Aru attended "the Higher Lectures for Women," which helped them work on perfecting their French. In the summer of 1872 Toru met Miss Martin, a clergyman's daughter, who became her closest English friend, and when the Dutt's returned to Kolkata in September 1873, Toru corresponded with her regularly and copiously. Toru's letters have survived and account for 232 pages of the *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, lovingly compiled by Harihar Das and published in 1921 by Oxford

University Press. Together with the other letters in the book, they are an engaging record of the author's life and times. They are not only indispensable to the student of cultural history, but possess as much literary merit as the writer's poetry and fiction. Indeed, the letters give an insight into the complexity of Toru's situation much more graphically than do her purely literary works. On the one hand she firmly affirmed, "India is my patrie", and frankly described the inhumane aspects of colonial rule; on the other, finding life in India too constricting (she notes sadly that on her walks in the Dutt's country house at Baumaree it would be improper for her to step beyond the boundaries of their property) she longs to return to Europe. The Dutt's in fact would have returned, but for the twin tragedies that overwhelmed them.

The four years that remained of Toru's life were as intense as one can imagine, marked by bereavement, mortal illness, assiduous study and phenomenal creativity. In July 1874, Aru died of tuberculosis, leaving behind translations of eight French poems that her sister incorporated into *Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876). No sooner had this book appeared than the signs of the disease showed in Toru as well. It ran its characteristic up and down course through which Toru heroically and optimistically continued her scholarly and creative pursuits.

Soon after the return to India Toru, under her father's supervision, had begun the study of Sanskrit, the creative fallout of which began to appear in periodicals and were subsequently collected in *Ballads of Hindustan*. Only months before her death she came across a French book, *La Femme dans l'Inde Antique* ("Women in Ancient India") and wrote enthusiastically to its author, Clarisse Bader, offering to translate it into English. Permission to do so was granted at once, but Toru's declining health wouldn't allow her even to start the work. The correspondence between the two writers, however, evinces growing friendship, and when Toru's French novel was discovered and published after her death, it was prefaced by a warm tribute from her French pen friend. The novel has been made available for the first time to the common anglophone reader in a new translation titled *Diary of Mademoiselle d'Arvers* (Penguin India 2005), which should be noticed separately.

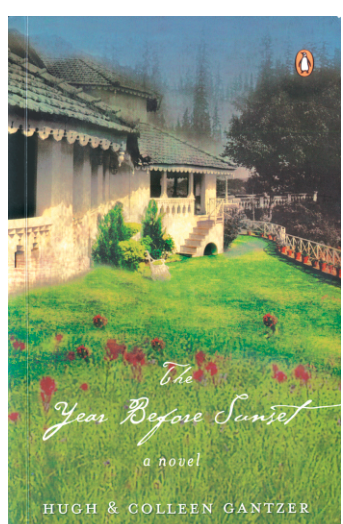
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## BookReview

# '...merely fluid prejudice.'

REBECCA SULTANA

*The Year Before Sunset: A Novel* (pb) by Hugh & Colleen Gantzer; PenguinIndia, New Delhi; 2005; pp. 250; Rs. 250.



On the eve of departure of the British from India, the Anglo-Indians found themselves in an invidious situation - caught between the European attitude of superiority towards Indian and Anglo-Indian alike and the Indian

mistrust of them, due to their aloofness and their Western-oriented culture. *The Year Before Sunset* is a coming-of-age novel of an Anglo-Indian boy, Phillip Brandon, during the troubled days before partition. The novel starts with a question nobody seems to answer to Phillip's satisfaction and ends, after a series of adventures and suspense, with it still unanswered, but Phillip being, nevertheless, a bit wiser.

Hindsight is always 20/20 and we can look at the mistakes of the past with insights lacking then, and so do the writers. The profound observations that a sixteen-year-old makes about inter-communal or inter-religious harmony sounds Utopian and rather anachronistic if we remember that the novel is set a year prior to the Partition, a time rife with angry emotions, divided loyalties and outbursts of violence all over India. Considering that India was reeling from communal violence the setting of the novel, the small Himalayan town of Lakhbagan with its sprawling bungalows, is blissfully protected from all that and presents itself as a picture of harmony and peace where

everybody is aware of one's place and everybody is firmly entrenched in that place so that the social equilibrium is not disturbed. With hindsight now, we know at what cost such a picture perfect world was created. In its unquestioning acceptance of colonialism, the novel positions the audience in the spectator's seat of the colonizer.

Historical fiction and films of the Raj have given us enough glimpses into the lives in bungalows complete with numerous servants, each with a different duty. These big houses were Indian versions of English country estates and were ideals sought for by many English, few of whom could have ever achieved something so ambitious back in England. Even into the 1940s many of the houses would not have electricity, refrigeration, and would be infested with rats, snakes and even small animals. In Lakhbagan, the small community of the English, nonetheless, deliberately keeps modernization at bay so that the "newfangled inventions" do not change their peaceful life.

Of course, that the novel is

from the perspective of a young Anglo-Indian boy gives it a particular angle. With all his proclamations of his being an "Indian" Phillip does have his moments of hauteur as he dances with his mother and sees the shocked glances of his servants: "Too bad. This is our way of life and anyone who didn't like it could lump it" (174). Also the fact that he was studying in a boarding school where scions of maharajas and princes boarded as well could have clouded his vision. What gave rise to my initial confusion was the absolute colour-blindness in Phillip's descriptions of his schoolmates or of the people at Lakhbagan. There is no way of knowing whether the person being talked about is a white or a native. Surely, if I know my history right, caste, regional affiliation, linguistic distinction and religion did play a big part in one's identity formation or in influencing one's attitude towards the other. The only person who seems to be the one to make a big do over these differences is the arch villain, Pratap Chowdhury. More about him later.

The Brandons, being Anglo-

Indians, are never seen to be too concerned about their own positions in their hill town of Ringali. Yet history denotes experiences of racial tensions to rise out of a system where racial delineations are given primary importance and where the economics of employment, social status, geography of residence and access, are bestowed upon some and denied to others. In the novel, if there are hints of prejudice then those are based not on one's family lineage but rather on one's profession. Reading Gantzer one is unaware of tensions between the natives, the whites and the Anglo-Indians, whereas literary works abound that reveal the complexities as such. For example, Michael Korda's *Queenie* reveals the stereotypes that a young Anglo-Indian girl has to endure. But then, if Phillip is colour blind, he cannot be blamed for that. Schools, such as the one Phillip attended, was patterned on the British public school system and were attended by the children of the civil and military officers of the Raj. There they were taught from age seven to nineteen "the sterling virtues

of teamwork, fair play and the great civilizing mission of 'the empire on which the Sun Never Sets'" (3). While the strategy of divide and rule was used most effectively, an important aspect of British rule in India was the psychological indoctrination of an elite layer within Indian society who was artfully tutored into becoming model British subjects. This English-educated layer of Indian society was craftily encouraged in absorbing values and notions about themselves and their land of birth that would be conducive to the British occupation on India, and furthering goals of exploiting its wealth and labour, as Macaulay's infamous Minutes of 1835 revealed. Britain needed a class of intellectuals meek and docile in their attitude towards the British, but full of disdain towards their fellow citizens. The British were seen to be the harbingers of modernity and everything that was rational and scientific. These and other such ideas were repeatedly filled in the minds of the young Indians who received instructions in these schools. Phillip's schoolmates fall within this category. Even their names sound

allegorical with a mixture of English and Indian nomenclature. We have Rags Singh and Buster Ahmed. The boys have a soaring ambition to attain—to become an ICS officer, that bastion of the Civil Service. It is no wonder then, that these idealistic young boys, protected as they were within the confines of their English schools, were unaware of the troubled times brewing. There were many, however, who did not find these values as preached by the British as ideals. One of these was Pratap Chowdhury. The whole novel, as we come to the end, is an elaborate plot to bring an end to an unruly revolutionary, Pratap Chowdhury, who would rather chant *Quit India* and *Jai Hind* and throw bombs than be patient enough to wait for the division of India as the British seemed fit to hand it over to the very British Nehru and Jinnah. Organized political resistance to the British occupation of India was mounting in the early part of the 20th century, yet the only evidence of this in the novel are rumors of a non-existent Rob Royish kind of character and petty revolutionaries who are

dismissed as common trouble-makers. If he were not depicted in the usual villainous garb, a disgruntled young man angry at being denied the family title that went to his uncle (who, by the way, is a friend of the Brandons), Chowdhury would have been the ideal freedom leader in the likes of Khudi Ram, Bhagat Singh, Mangal Pandey or Titumir. But let's not forget who's telling the story. Perspective is, then, of utmost importance. As Mark Twain had said: "The very ink with which all history is written is merely fluid prejudice." One's man's hero can be another man's villain.

Hugh and Colleen Gantzer, seventh- and second-generation Anglo-Indians, are more known as travel writers, photographers and makers of travel documentaries. They have also written on environmental issues. The book is a good read as an adolescent adventure.

Rebecca Sultana taught English at East-West University, Dhaka. She will be leaving soon for Canada.