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A Comparative Study of Nature and Transience in the Poetry of Toru Dutt and John Keats

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Abstract

This paper treats of the poetic connection between Toru Dutt and John Keats, in the light of the comparison of nature, beauty, memory and mortality. Keats was an English Romantic poet in the early 1800s, while Dutt was a late 1800s colonial poet in India; yet both poets employ natural images to examine the fragility of the human condition. In "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats' song is an imaginative freedom and artistic immortality, whereas in "Our Casuarina Tree," Dutt's familiar garden tree becomes a memorial for lost loves and a defense against oblivion. The study suggests that both poets are dealing with the transient through an appreciation of beauty and art, and that their approaches to consolation are contrasted. Keats finds his solution to the pain and agony of life in the imagination, music, and sensuous experience. Dutt, on the other hand, is searching for emotional survival in memory, in personal attachment, in the poetic remembrance. The paper also demonstrates the fact that Dutt uses the Romanticism of Keats and projects it onto an Indian cultural and emotional context, giving rise to an original and also indebted towards English Romanticism.

I. INTRODUCTION

In spite of the distance of time, place and culture between John Keats and Toru Dutt, it is strange to find such a common theme in their poems, one of beauty, nature, mortality, and the power of memory. As one of the leading poets of the second generation of English Romanticism, Keats lived for only a short time, but one of great productivity, before his death in 1821. His poetry is distinguished by sensuous images, classical allusion, emotional intensity and an abiding preoccupation with the interplay of beauty and death. In July 1819, 'Ode to a Nightingale' was published anonymously in Annals of the Fine Arts; it was published in Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems (1820) (Fitzwilliam Museum) and is one of his best known meditations on suffering, imagination, and mortality (Representative Poetry Online).

Born in Calcutta in 1856 and dying at the age of twenty-one in 1877, Toru Dutt has a position of great foundation in Indian Writing in English. She wrote poetry in the French and English languages, and is remembered, among other things, for A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields (1876) and Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan (1882) (posthumously) (Academy of American Poets). "Our Casuarina Tree," which appears in the latter collection, has been called one of the best elegiac poems in Indian English poetry. It is a rich Indian garden scene that also celebrates personal loss, childhood youth, and a Keatsian sense of duration.

The relationship between Dutt and Keats is more evident in the case of 'Our Casuarina Tree'. It has

been noted that the poem shares some similarity with the content and form of Keats's odes (Academy of American Poets). But like the nightingale of Keats, Dutt's casuarina tree does not just belong to the physical landscape. It becomes a poetic symbol through which the speaker faces the loss and the possibility of living after death.

This paper will contrast the work of Keats and Dutt in four major aspects: their treatment of nature, their attitude towards the concept of mortality, their use of memory, and their belief in art being a form of permanence. The central idea is the poets both battle transience through beauty, but they envision that battle in different ways. Whereas Keats' beauty is an aesthetic and imaginative retreat, Dutt's beauty is an act of remembering, emotion and culture.

Statement of the Problem

Both Keats and Dutt describe the transience of time, the suffering of loss and the hope for the preservation of beauty. Their poems have been studied however, separately in the study of British Romanticism and Indian English literature. There is a need for a focused comparative study to gain insight into how Dutt works with Keatsian themes, techniques and transforms them with her cultural and personal perspective.

The dilemma that this paper aims to solve is thus twofold: one, to discover the thematic and stylistic resonances between Keats and Dutt; and two, to demonstrate how Dutt transcends imitation to forge a unique poetic voice inspired by the Indian landscape, memory and elegiac sensibility. The goals of the Study are:

- To study the portrayal of nature in the poems of John keats and Toru Dutt.
- To examine the attitudes towards death, pain and impermanence in 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'Our Casuarina Tree'.
- To examine how memory and loss play a part in both poets.
- To contrast their imagery, symbolism, musicality and poetic form.
- To evaluate the degree to which Keats was an influence on Toru Dutt's poetry.
- To show that Dutt is original in the context of Indian English poetry in the Romantic tradition.

Research Questions

- How do both Keats and Dutt use natural imagery to convey philosophical and emotional questions?
- How does each poet address issues of death and suffering?
- How does memory feature in their poetry?
- How does Keats and Dutt use beauty and art to defy transience?
- What extent of a Keatsian poet can be said to be Toru Dutt?
- How does Dutt make English Romanticism "Indian"?

Hypothesis

This study is based on the hypothesis that Our Casuarina Tree by Toru Dutt is thematically and formally similar to John Keats' Ode to a Nightingale, especially in its analysis of nature, mortality and artistic permanence. But Dutt is not simply a rehash of Romanticism, as practiced by Keats. She reimagines it with an elegiac, personal and culturally informed perspective in which poetry serves to help keep memory alive instead of helping to escape from reality.

Scope and Limitations

The study is confined to the comparative study of two major poems – "Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats and "Our Casuarina Tree" by Toru Dutt. Only when other poems by either poet are invoked to aid the main argument are they referred to. The paper does not make an attempt to do a comprehensive survey of Romantic poetry or Indian English poetry. It is thematic, stylistic and comparative rather than historical or biographical.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research uses the method of textual analysis and comparative literary criticism. The main texts are Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' and Dutt's 'Our Casuarina tree.' Analysis = imagery, symbolism, tone, structure, sound patterns, and theme.

Secondary sources are the Academy of American Poets, the Poetry Foundation, Britannica, Representative Poetry Online, the Fitzwilliam Museum and studies of Dutt and Keats. The comparison is a thematic one and not a chronological one. It does not take the route of direct borrowing in all cases, but looks at the way that Dutt internalizes

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and transforms Keatsian Romantic issues in her own poetic and cultural context.

Romantic beauty and the problem of mortality: the case of John Keats

John Keats's poetry is very much an exploration of the conflict between suffering and promise of beauty. His speakers long for a world where it was all perfect, but they also understand that such a world will never eradicate pain, decay or death. The tension in his poetry stems from this.

The speaker in his poem "Ode to a Nightingale" starts in a state of physical and psychological distress: "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense" (Keats). The opening clearly sets up the contrast between pain and freedom from pain in the poem. The song of the nightingale is a symbol of joy, freedom and seemingly eternal life.

Keats' nature is sensual and involvement. The poet envisions wine of "Flora and the country green"—and he visualizes the nightingale's world in terms of shade, fragrance, flowers and the moon. This is an example of Romantic imagery which symbolizes the Romantic belief that nature can call forth the imagination and open up a reality more than what could be seen.

But nature is not presented as a straightforward remedy to suffering by Keats. Although the song of the nightingale is eternal, the poet is aware of the failings and frailty of human kind. In the famous address, "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!," Keats compares the bird's song to the death of human beings. While some are listening to the music of the nightingale, some lives pass away.

Beauty is thus inviting and ephemeral for Keats. It gives a glimpse of transcendence, but it cannot destroy death. The poem does not end with a "no" or "yes" statement, but with a question: "Do I wake or sleep?". (Keats). Keats's vision is that of uncertainty. Beauty can take the mind out of its sorrows, but cannot put it back again.

Nature, Memory, and Cultural Belonging – 9. Toru Dutt

Toru Dutt's poetry is from a different era and culture. A native of Calcutta, she studied literature in India and Europe, spending some time in France and England (Victorian Poetry and Poetics). Her writing was a product of this dual inheritance, and she learned English poetic forms and also appropriated Indian myth, landscape and memory.

Dutt's book of Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan contains retold Hindu myths as well as original lyric poems such as "Our Casuarina Tree" (Victorian Poetry and Poetics). The poem is set in her childhood home garden of Baugmaree, but transcends memory and memory of the self to perform a meditation on love, death and remembrance.

In Dutt's poetry nature is not abstract, but close at hand. Casuarina is not just a symbol of beauty, it is a boyhood friend, a witness of friendship, a link with the dead. While the tree's physical majesty is expressed in terms of height, strength, flowers and birds, its emotional significance is the memories it holds.

Dutt's use of nature, then, is different from Keats's. Whether it is in the form of imagination, Keats tends to go into nature to get away from the suffering and the pain of human life. Dutt is back to nature to get a hold of the old. Her garden is not an escape from reality, but a saving of reality—a space where those who are not there anymore still live on in her memory.

The closing lines of "Our Casuarina Tree" state this of course: "May Love defend thee from Oblivion's curse" (Dutt). "Oblivion's curse" actually refers to Dutt's worst fears, which are not only the physical death but the loss of memory. Poems are her way of overcoming that fear.

III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NATURE

Keats's Nightingale

The bird in "Ode to a Nightingale" symbolizes a sense of peace and tranquility that is outside the realm of human suffering. It sings all the time: its song is a ghostly, eternal process. It is the speaker's wish to fade away with it, and to depart a world of sickness, old age and sadness.

The nightingale is a symbol of night, darkness, darkness and dreams. The poet takes its song to a dark natural environment where the norms of everyday reality are questionable. This shift from reality to imagination is not uncommon in Romantic writing by Keats.

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But the escape isn't finished. The speaker is drawn back to himself by the word "forlorn" and the vision fades away. There is a temporary sanctuary in nature, but it is not a permanent home.

Dutt's Casuarina Tree

The casuarina tree too is a symbol for Dutt, but here its role is different. It does not call the speaker to leave the world. Rather, it keeps her grounded in the realm of past. The tree is in a known garden and brings to mind certain people, experiences and feelings.

The tree is considered strong and durable, but also susceptible. Even the strongest of natural images might need poetic protection as Dutt's last prayer to Love to guard it from oblivion. The tree lives not just because of its physical strength, but because the poet recalls and records it.

So Keats's nature is visionary and escapist and Dutt's nature is memorial and relational. The two poets both give meaning to the landscape—one in a positive, the other in a negative, direction.

Comparative Analysis of Mortality

The closest connection between the two poets can be made on the basis of mortality. But Keats was highly conscious of sickness and death, and his poetry often questions the survival of beauty after man. In "Ode to a Nightingale", the speaker is comparing the immortality of the bird to the suffering of generations of man.

But Dutt was a poet who knew a thing or two about losing, too. She lost her sister Aru and has not lived long herself, so her poems frequently seem mournful. From point of view of "Our Casuarina Tree", death isn't a philosophical issue but a personal absence. The tree reminds of those who are not with us anymore.

Both poets are defiant of death. A nightingale sings her song; Dutt sings the song of the casuarina tree, and the lives of those who are remembered by it. In both poems, art is a means of survival.

The difference is in the direction of consolation. In Keats' imagination, one moves away from the world, to beauty and imagination. Dutt envisions a return to the human realm in terms of memory and love.

Every Little Thing is Worth Remembering

Keats's memories are wide and wide-ranging—historical, imaginative. The speaker is reminded of earlier times and lost people, such as Ruth, who was "in tears amid the alien corn" (Keats). Memory links present moment with a greater human story of exile, longing and sorrow.

Memory in Dutt is individual and mournful. The tree of casuarina evokes memories of playing as a child, friendship and family loss. The poet's use of specificity enhances the emotional power of the poem, as the tree is not a generic symbol but a cherished part of the poet's experience.

Keats tries to find solace in aesthetic experience. Dutt lives for memory. But both point to the possibility of making this loss permanent through the power of poetry. The poem itself is a memorial.

The Art of Music Form, Music, and Craftsmanship

The "Ode to a Nightingale" is an 8-stanza poem that earned praise for its musical prose, vivid imagery, and disciplined form (Britannica). The poem's movement from pain to vision and back to uncertainty provides it with dramatic shape.

Our Casuarina Tree" by Dutt is also very well crafted. The form of the poem, the use of English seventeenth-century poetic conventions, and the musical use of language indicate that she was familiar with English poetic tradition. The poem has been called a "masterpiece of craftsmanship" and enjoyed "fine blending of thought, emotion, and form" (Jason and Magill, both quoted in Academy of American Poets).

It is easy to see that Dutt's poetry has been inspired by Keatsian Romanticism because of the formal similarity between the two poets. But her content—the Indian landscape, childhood in the colonies and the loss of a loved one—distinguishes her poem from Keats.

Keatsian Influence and Dutt's Originality

Dutt's indebtedness to Keats is apparent in her sensual imagery, the use of a natural symbol, her interest in immortality, and her faith in the power of poetry. She, like Keats, recognizes the fragility of beauty, and the transience of human life.

But Dutt is not only an imitator of Keats. Her poetry combines English Romantic form and Indian cultural material. Indian, her garden; personal, her memories; and molded by the experience of her colonial family, her grief; and imaginatively poetic, between

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European literary influence and Indian emotional belonging.

In this regard, Dutt can be termed a Romantic poet, but with a difference. She has inherited Keats's sense of beauty and mortality (and what can be done with them), but she channels it toward memory, love, and cultural grounding.

Comparative Table

Aspect	John Keats	Toru Dutt
Major poem	"Ode to a Nightingale"	"Our Casuarina Tree"
Central natural symbol	Nightingale	Casuarina tree
Function of nature	Escape, vision, aesthetic transcendence	Memory, attachment, emotional preservation
View of mortality	Human life is transient; art may suggest immortality	Death causes personal loss; poetry resists oblivion
Dominant tone	Dreamlike, conflicted, sensuous	Tender, elegiac, reflective
Cultural context	English Romanticism and classical tradition	Indian landscape and English Romantic form
Form of consolation	Imagination and song	Memory and poetic remembrance
Final attitude	Uncertain return to reality	Hopeful preservation through love and memory

IV. FINDINGS

- Nature in both cases acts as a symbolic place of contemplation of human life.
- For Keats, beauty is to be a spiritual flight from suffering.
- Beauty is Dutt's way of reminding us of the past and not forgetting.
- Both poets equate art with enduring.
- Dutt's poetry also exhibits obvious similarities to the odes of Keats, particularly in its symbolic imagery of nature, and its focus on immortality.
- Dutt's work is not just a copy of Romanticism, but an indianization of Romanticism with the themes set in an Indian context and with a personal, elegiac structure.

V. CONCLUSION

Toru Dutt and John Keats are separated by centuries, countries, and worlds of culture, but their poetry is connected in a way that is shared in a deep interest in beauty, nature, memory, and death. In "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats's song has become a symbol of imaginative freedom and artistic immortality. In 'Our Casuarina Tree' Dutt uses the common garden tree to create a memorial for those who've lost their lives and a reminder to never forget. The comparison shows that the poetry of Dutt is very Romantic in sensibility but original in cultural and emotional orientation. Unlike Keats, who tries to transcend death through the power of beauty, Dutt tries to cling to life by the power of memory. The collection of their poems demonstrates that poetry has the power to face death, rather than shying away from it, through forms of beauty that last beyond it.

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