

THE CASUARINA TREE AS AN ARCHIVE OF MEMORY AND ECOLOGICAL BELONGING IN TORU DUTT'S POETRY

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Abstract—Toru Dutt's "Our Casuarina Tree" transforms a tree in the family garden at Baugmaree into an archive where childhood, sibling loss, colonial mobility, nonhuman life, and poetic inheritance remain materially connected. This article argues that the casuarina is not merely a symbol onto which the speaker projects private grief. Its trunk, branches, creeper, animals, shadows, soundscape, and seasonal endurance participate in remembering, making the poem an early instance of ecological belonging in Indian English poetry. The tree gathers human and more-than-human histories without dissolving their difference. It recalls the poet's dead siblings, mediates the distance between Bengal and Europe, and allows a multilingual, Christian, Bengali, and cosmopolitan writer to claim place without reducing belonging to national purity. The poem's archive is living rather than static: it grows, bears wounds, shelters creatures, emits a perceived lament, and depends on love and poetry for protection from oblivion. Its final allusion to Wordsworth's Borrowdale yews enters English literary tradition while redirecting that tradition toward a remembered Indian ecology. Drawing on memory studies, postcolonial ecocriticism, and theories of place, this essay also examines the garden's limits as a privileged domestic landscape and distinguishes intimate ecological attachment from scientific conservation. The poem remains contemporary in an age of urban tree loss, climate migration, and digital memory because it shows that environmental destruction also erases family histories, sensory knowledge, and forms of identity rooted in place.

Keywords: Toru Dutt, *Our Casuarina Tree*, memory, ecological belonging, archive, grief, place, postcolonial ecocriticism.

Introduction: A Tree That Remembers

"Our Casuarina Tree" begins with close physical attention. A creeper coils around the trunk 'like a huge Python,' leaving scars on bark that is strong enough to bear the embrace (Dutt, lines 1–5). Birds, bees, flowers, a gray baboon, its young, cattle, water lilies, and a kokila gather around the tree. Only after establishing this more-than-human world does the speaker explain why the tree is personally sacred. It is bound to companions who are now dead.

The movement from description to remembrance is central. The casuarina does not enter the poem as a ready-made symbol of grief. It first appears as a living habitat with its own scale, sounds, and relationships. Memory grows from sustained attention to this life. The tree becomes an archive because bodies, routines, voices, and losses have accumulated around it, not because nature serves as a blank surface for human feeling.

This article argues that the poem creates ecological belonging through a living archive. The tree stores childhood association, but it also continues beyond the children. Its endurance enables the speaker to connect Bengal with distant European landscapes and personal mortality with literary survival. The archive is ecological because memory resides in relations among human beings, plant life, animals, weather, sound, and place.

Such a reading expands the familiar interpretation of the poem as nostalgia. Nostalgia is present, but the poem does more than long for a lost childhood. It asks how love can preserve a place without possessing it and how poetry can honour a nonhuman life without reducing it to metaphor. These questions place Dutt within contemporary conversations about environmental memory and decolonial belonging.

Toru Dutt and a Transcultural Life

Toru Dutt was born in Calcutta in 1856 into a Bengali family that converted to Christianity. She received an unusual multilingual education, learned English and French, later studied Sanskrit, and spent formative years in France and England. Her writing moved across languages and literary traditions before her death from tuberculosis in 1877 at the age of twenty-one. *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* appeared posthumously in 1882.

Her biography complicates any simple opposition between Indian rootedness and European influence. Dutt translated French poetry into English, wrote a French novel, reworked Indian legends, and addressed European landscapes from an Indian family history. Chandani Lokuge describes her as a significant early transnational writer whose work cannot be contained by one national tradition (Lokuge).

The loss of siblings shaped this imaginative world. Her brother Abju died in childhood, and her sister Aru, a close companion in study and translation, died in 1874. In “Our Casuarina Tree,” the unnamed ‘companions’ join private family grief to a landscape known collectively. The possessive ‘our’ belongs neither to Toru alone nor simply to the human family. It emerges from shared time under the tree.

Dutt’s cosmopolitanism intensifies rather than cancels local attachment. Distance makes the garden audible in memory. The poem remembers an Indian tree through English verse while the speaker recalls it amid European landscapes. Ecological belonging is not limited to physical residence. It can be carried through sensory memory, language, and grief, although such portability never fully replaces presence.

From Monument to Living Archive

An archive is commonly imagined as a controlled collection of documents. The casuarina stores no written records, yet it holds traces: scars on its trunk, repeated animal visits, childhood games, shadows on the tank, remembered voices, and the speaker’s later act of naming. Its memory is distributed across material form and human recollection. The poem teaches the reader how to read this unconventional record.

Pierre Nora distinguishes living memory from the sites that become necessary when shared environments of memory weaken (Nora). Dutt’s tree contains both conditions. It belongs to an experienced childhood world, but bereavement and travel make deliberate commemoration necessary. The poem becomes a site of memory because the earlier community has been broken.

Unlike a stone monument, the tree changes. It grows, flowers, shelters animals, and remains vulnerable. Its archive cannot be separated from biological life. Decay and renewal are part of its record. This living temporality resists the archival fantasy that preservation means freezing an object outside history.

The tree also exceeds the memories assigned to it. It existed before the poem’s act of consecration and supports creatures that do not participate in the Dutt family story. An ecological archive therefore contains more than human meaning. The poet can recognize its life but cannot exhaust it.

The Opening Ecology: Creeper, Tree, and Entanglement

The poem’s first image combines violence and intimacy. The python-like creeper winds around the rugged trunk and leaves ‘deep’ scars, yet the casuarina wears it as a scarf (Dutt, lines 1–6). The relation cannot be classified as simple harmony. Growth involves pressure, dependence, marking, and display. Ecological life appears as entanglement rather than peaceful scenery.

The scarred trunk anticipates the poem’s human memory. Loss marks the speaker as the creeper marks the tree. Neither wound disappears, but it becomes part of continuing form. This analogy should not make tree and mourner identical. The power lies in relation: observing the tree gives the speaker a material language for endurance.

Flowers hang in crimson clusters while birds and bees gather during the day and an apparently endless song fills the garden at night. The tree is habitat, food source, perch, acoustic center, and visual landmark. Lawrence Buell argues that environmental texts recognize the nonhuman environment as more than a framing device for human action (Buell). Dutt’s opening fulfills that condition by giving the ecosystem narrative presence before explaining autobiographical meaning.

The apparent grandeur of the tree is therefore relational. Its greatness does not arise from isolation but from what it bears and enables. Creeper, insect, bird, mammal, flower, and human observer create the scene together. Ecological belonging begins in this recognition of dependence.

Dawn, Window, and the Ethics of Attention

The second stanza is organized through the speaker's window at dawn. The frame acknowledges that nature is seen from a domestic interior and through a particular human viewpoint. The speaker does not pretend to possess a view from nowhere. Her ecological knowledge begins with repeated, situated observation.

A gray baboon sits statue-like on the crest while its offspring play below. Cattle move toward pasture; the tree's shadow lies across the water tank; water lilies open. The scene joins stillness and movement, height and surface, wild animal and domestic routine. The garden is not sealed from agricultural life or animal agency.

The word 'often' matters because it implies habit. Attachment forms through recurrence rather than one sublime encounter. Yi-Fu Tuan's concept of topophilia describes affective bonds between people and place (Tuan). Dutt's topophilia is built through mornings, sounds, views, and small expectations. Memory later draws strength from this accumulated attention.

The window also marks privilege. The garden belongs to a family household, and the speaker has leisure to observe. Ecocritical celebration should not universalize this experience as though every colonial subject encountered land through private contemplation. The poem's intimacy is valuable precisely when located within its class and domestic conditions.

Sibling Loss and the Ecology of Grief

The poem turns explicitly from beauty to loss when the speaker says the tree is dear because beneath it she played with loved companions. Their memory blends with the tree until recollection rises 'hot' to the eyes (Dutt, lines 23–30). Grief is bodily: memory produces tears and heat rather than abstract reflection.

The tree does not console by replacing the dead. It keeps absence present. To see it is to encounter the difference between its survival and the siblings' deaths. Environmental continuity can sharpen grief because the place remains available while the people associated with it do not.

At the same time, the tree permits relationship across death. The plural 'we' is reactivated through a shared attachment. The companions cannot return, but love directed toward the tree continues something they held together. Mourning becomes care for a common world rather than withdrawal into an isolated self.

Judith Butler describes grief as revealing the relations through which a self is constituted (Butler). Dutt's speaker likewise appears as a relational being: sister, observer, traveler, poet, and participant in a garden ecology. The archive of memory preserves not only images of the dead but the form of selfhood created with them.

The Tree's Lament and More-than-Human Voice

In distant lands, the speaker hears what she calls the tree's 'lament,' a sound compared to the sea breaking on a shingle beach (Dutt, lines 31–40). The passage risks pathetic fallacy because human grief is attributed to a tree. Yet it also expands agency. The tree is not silent matter; it enters memory through sound and addresses the displaced listener.

The poem carefully leaves the source of the lament ambiguous. It may be the actual movement of casuarina branchlets, a remembered sound, or grief translating itself into an environmental voice. This ambiguity prevents a simple claim that nature literally shares human emotion. Perception is relational: tree, wind, memory, and listener create the lament together.

The comparison with the sea carries the tree beyond one garden. Its sound crosses landscapes and joins Bengal to France or Italy. Memory does not reproduce the original place exactly. It finds analogies in new surroundings, allowing foreign nature to call forth the familiar tree. Exile becomes an acoustic relation between environments.

Postcolonial ecocriticism cautions against separating environmental imagination from histories of travel, empire, and displacement (Huggan and Tiffin). Dutt's mobility was privileged in some respects, yet it occurred within colonial routes and unequal cultural worlds. The remembered tree offers orientation without restoring an untouched home.

Bengal, Europe, and a Cosmopolitan Sense of Place

Dutt's use of English and European poetic forms does not make the casuarina less Indian, nor does an Indian subject automatically decolonize English. The poem works through translation. A Bengal garden is rendered within a lyric vocabulary shaped by Romantic nature poetry, Christian memorial feeling, Sanskrit recovery elsewhere in Dutt's work, and French literary education.

This hybridity challenges the expectation that ecological belonging requires cultural purity. The tree is locally situated while the poem is transnational. Place gains meaning through encounter with other places, not through isolation from them. Ursula Heise's concept of eco-cosmopolitanism is useful here because it joins attachment to local environments with awareness of broader ecological and cultural networks (Heise).

The speaker's belonging is nevertheless asymmetrical. Europe can become a setting in which India is remembered, while English publication gives the Indian tree a global literary route. Colonial language provides access and imposes standards. Dutt uses that language to preserve an environment excluded from the central geography of English poetry.

The result is neither mimicry nor a simple nationalist nature poem. The casuarina becomes a node through which Bengal, Europe, family, and literature are related. Ecological belonging is layered: one can learn from distant landscapes while remaining accountable to the place that formed memory.

Wordsworth, Literary Memory, and Counter Canon

Near the conclusion, Dutt invokes Wordsworth's yew trees of Borrowdale. The allusion places her casuarina beside a celebrated English literary landscape. She does not merely borrow prestige. She claims that an Indian tree and an Indian woman's memory can enter the same durable field of poetic commemoration.

The comparison also reveals a difference. Wordsworth's yews carry historical and sublime associations, while Dutt's tree bears sibling intimacy, animal activity, and colonial distance. Canonical dialogue works through adaptation rather than equivalence. The casuarina is not made valuable by becoming a yew.

This gesture creates a counter-archive within English. The literary tradition that circulated through colonial education is used to preserve a Bengal place. English poetry becomes less exclusively English when the casuarina enters it, just as Dutt's imagination is altered by Wordsworth. Decolonization here is a change in the archive's contents and relations, not a claim of cultural isolation.

The allusion also exposes the politics of remembrance. Some landscapes become universally recognizable because powerful institutions teach and reproduce their poems. Dutt's plea for protection from oblivion recognizes that literary survival is unequal. Love must be joined to publication, teaching, editing, and reading if the tree's memory is to endure.

Poetic Form as an Ecology of Return

The poem consists of five eleven-line stanzas with recurring rhyme and long, unfolding sentences. Its formal return mirrors memory's movement: observation leads to association, distance intensifies recall, and the ending returns to the tree through consecration. Repetition does not restore the past unchanged; each return adds grief and interpretation.

Dutt's diction moves between the sensuous and the ceremonial. Python, scarf, crimson flowers, baboon, lilies, dirge, and oblivion belong to different scales of language. The mixture prevents the tree from becoming either botanical inventory or abstract monument. It is sensuous life and an object of ritualized remembrance.

Personification gives the tree nobility and vulnerability, but the poem also attends to ecological detail. This double register is central to its achievement. Scientific precision is not the aim, yet the nonhuman world is sufficiently differentiated to resist pure allegory. Animals behave, flowers open, shadows fall, and sounds continue independently of the speaker.

The final prayer, 'May Love defend thee from Oblivion's curse,' makes poetry an act of care rather than mastery (Dutt, line 55). The speaker cannot guarantee biological survival. She can transmit attention. Poetic immortality is therefore modest and ambitious: it preserves a relation even when the material future remains uncertain.

Gendered Authorship and the Right to Remember Place

The poem's act of commemoration also has a gendered literary significance. Dutt wrote at a time when colonial education made English print culture available to a small group of Indian women while domestic convention sharply limited women's public authority. Her garden is therefore more than a retreat from history. It is a place from which a young woman turns private observation and family grief into a claim upon literary permanence. The poem does not ask permission to treat her remembered landscape as worthy of the ode-like seriousness associated with canonical English nature poetry.

This authority is quiet but unmistakable. The speaker names what she has seen, interprets the tree's apparent lament, recalls the dead, and finally performs a blessing. These actions move from perception to consecration. They make the female lyric voice the custodian of a family memory that might otherwise disappear. Yet custody does not mean

ownership in an absolute sense. The speaker repeatedly acknowledges lives and sounds beyond her control, so poetic authority is grounded in attention rather than domination.

The title's first-person plural is crucial to this balance. 'Our' indicates intimacy and shared history, but it does not function like a deed of property. The tree belongs to a community of memory and, ecologically, to the many creatures that use it. Its human name is relational. Read in this way, the poem revises possessive language from within: belonging describes mutual attachment, not unrestricted power over land or life.

Judith Butler's account of mourning argues that loss reveals how deeply a self is constituted through relations with others (Butler). Dutt's speaker similarly discovers that personal identity cannot be separated from dead siblings or from the place where their companionship took form. The self that speaks is not autonomous. It is assembled through kinship, landscape, literary language, and remembered sensation. Ecological belonging enlarges this relational self without pretending that a tree experiences bereavement in precisely human terms.

For contemporary readers, this gendered act of memory remains important. Women's environmental knowledge has often been dismissed as merely domestic or sentimental, even when it records local changes in water, plants, food, health, and seasonal life. Dutt demonstrates that intimate knowledge can carry intellectual and ethical force. At the same time, the poem cautions against treating women as naturally closer to nature, a stereotype that would turn historically produced care into biological destiny. Her environmental attention is a practiced achievement: she observes, remembers, reads across traditions, and chooses to write.

Botanical Movement and the Problem of Native Belonging

The name 'casuarina' adds another layer to the poem's geography. Casuarina denotes a group of trees associated especially with Australia, Southeast Asia, and Pacific regions, many of which circulated widely through imperial botanical and commercial networks. The tree in Dutt's Bengal garden may therefore embody mobility as well as rootedness. A plant can become intimately local through duration and relationship even when its species history crosses seas and political borders.

This history complicates any equation between ecological belonging and purity of origin. Dutt herself moved among Bengal, France, and England and wrote across Bengali, French, English, and Sanskrit traditions. The remembered tree is similarly meaningful not because it represents an untouched national essence but because it has entered a particular web of life. Such belonging is historical and situated. It arises from what a being does in a place, what relations gather around it, and what responsibilities those relations create.

Ursula Heise warns that exclusive attachment to the local can obscure wider ecological connections, while a planetary perspective can become too abstract to motivate care (Heise). The casuarina mediates those scales. Its garden presence is specific enough to carry childhood memory, yet the poem's European recollections and transnational literary allusions keep the local from appearing sealed. Place is a meeting point of routes as well as roots.

This does not mean that every introduced species should be celebrated. In present conservation practice, a species may support one habitat while becoming invasive in another. The poem cannot answer such scientific questions, and affection alone is not an ecological assessment. What it contributes is an account of relational value: the recognition that decisions about plants also affect animal shelter, human memory, neighborhood identity, and inherited meanings. Scientific evidence and cultural memory should inform one another without being confused.

The casuarina's mixed history finally strengthens the poem's postcolonial force. Empire moved plants, people, texts, and classifications, often violently and for profit. Dutt works within the resulting world but refuses to let colonial routes monopolize meaning. By attaching sibling love and Indian childhood to a mobile species in an English poem, she converts an imperial geography into a personal and ecological counter-map. Belonging becomes neither blood-and-soil nationalism nor placeless cosmopolitanism; it is the ethical labor of sustaining relationships in a world already marked by movement.

Archive, Conservation, and Their Limits

Calling the tree an archive can encourage conservation because it shows that environmental loss is also cultural and emotional loss. A felled tree may erase habitat, shade, carbon storage, and soil protection, but also family history, neighborhood orientation, ritual use, and remembered sound. Environmental assessment often undervalues these relational forms of significance.

Yet literary remembrance cannot substitute for material protection. A tree may live in a poem after its ecosystem has been destroyed. The archive preserves knowledge of attachment while also recording failure. Ecological belonging becomes ethical only when it supports care for living environments and the communities connected to them.

The casuarina itself complicates contemporary conservation categories. Species of *Casuarina* have wide histories of movement and can be native, cultivated, or invasive in different regions. The poem does not provide botanical certainty about the individual tree. Its ecological value arises from a situated network, reminding readers that care must attend to specific habitats rather than assume every beloved species is beneficial everywhere.

The garden is also a designed environment, not untouched wilderness. Human planting, architecture, water storage, domestic life, and nonhuman habitation overlap. This mixed landscape is important for urban ecology, where conservation frequently depends on gardens, roadside trees, tanks, ponds, and small habitat corridors.

Contemporary Relevance: Tree Loss and Climate Memory

Rapid urban development often treats mature trees as replaceable units. Saplings may be promised as compensation, but ecological function and memory cannot be immediately transferred. Dutt's poem helps explain why residents mourn particular trees. Age, shade, animal use, daily orientation, and shared history make them more than interchangeable greenery.

Climate change intensifies this problem. Storms, heat, drought, fire, sea-level rise, and shifting species ranges alter landscapes that organize personal and collective identity. People may become separated from familiar ecologies without crossing a national border. The speaker's distant hearing of the casuarina anticipates this environmental displacement, though her travel differs from forced climate migration.

Digital archives can preserve photographs, maps, recordings, and testimony about lost environments. They widen access but may create the illusion that data replaces habitat. Dutt's living archive offers a corrective. Memory is embodied and multisensory, formed through repeated contact with other lives. A digital record is valuable when it supports renewed attention and action, not when it becomes an excuse for destruction.

The poem also invites intergenerational environmental practice. Children form attachments through recurring encounters with nearby trees, animals, water, and seasons. Urban planning and education that remove such contact weaken ecological memory. Conservation begins not only with information about distant wilderness but with the ability to know and care for a particular place.

Finally, "Our Casuarina Tree" shows how grief can become public care. Ecological mourning need not end in helpless nostalgia. Naming what has been loved clarifies what is at risk and why protection matters. Poetry cannot legislate, but it can create the durable attention from which stewardship grows.

Conclusion

Toru Dutt's casuarina is a living archive because it holds memory through material and ecological relations. Its scarred trunk, climbing creeper, birds, bees, baboons, shadow, flowers, and sounds preserve more than a family anecdote. They form the environment within which sibling love and loss become knowable. The tree remembers by continuing to live and by enabling the poet to remember.

The poem's ecological belonging is local without being culturally sealed. Bengal is recalled through European distance and written into English literary tradition through a multilingual Indian voice. The Wordsworth allusion does not subordinate the casuarina; it revises the geography of the canon. At the same time, the private garden and the poet's class location remind readers that no experience of nature represents everyone.

The final defense against oblivion joins love to poetic transmission. Dutt cannot return the dead or guarantee the tree's material future, but she can preserve a relation that asks later readers to attend. In an age of climate displacement and accelerating tree loss, this is not a minor achievement. "Our Casuarina Tree" teaches that ecological destruction damages archive of feeling and identity, while environmental care protects the living conditions through which memory, community, and belonging endure.

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