



## Echoes of home and absence: Reading diasporic consciousness in Toru Dutt's "Our Casuarina Tree"

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### Abstract

This paper examines Toru Dutt's "Our Casuarina Tree" as articulating an incipient or affective form of diasporic consciousness, foregrounding themes of memory, distance, and emotional attachment to homeland. While the poem ostensibly presents a nostalgic recollection of a childhood landscape, it simultaneously registers a deeper sense of absence shaped by geographical and cultural separation. Reading the poem through the framework of diasporic studies, this paper argues that the Casuarina tree emerges as a symbolic anchor of belonging that sustains the poet's fractured identity across spatial divides. The affective intensity of loss, longing, and remembrance is not overtly declared but subtly evoked through imagery, silence, and emotional resonance. These implicit meanings reveal how Dutt negotiates home and exile, presence and absence, within a colonial and transnational context. The study suggests that 'Our Casuarina Tree' transcends personal elegy to gesture toward a proto-diasporic sensibility, anticipating later postcolonial engagements with memory and identity. By situating the poem within the discourse of diaspora, the paper repositions Toru Dutt as a significant precursor in diasporic literary expression.

**Keywords:** Diasporic consciousness, memory and absence, Toru Dutt, homeland and exile, postcolonial poetry

### Introduction

Toru Dutt's "Our Casuarina Tree" (1927) [8] has long been celebrated in Indo-Anglian scholarship for its poignant evocation of personal loss and its richly symbolic natural imagery. On the surface, the poem appears to be a nostalgic tribute to a beloved tree that bore witness to the poet's happy childhood in her native Bengal, surrounded by the laughter of siblings now deceased. Yet, beneath this nostalgic surface lies a deeper diasporic consciousness—a psychic negotiation between memory and displacement that resonates beyond simple reminiscence. The current study advances the claim that the poem articulates an affective structure of displacement and memory that may be read as proto-diasporic rather than fully diasporic in the modern sociological sense.

This study employs the term diasporic consciousness [1] in a deliberately qualified and non-sociological sense. Toru Dutt does not belong to a historically constituted diaspora marked by mass migration, forced displacement, or collective ethnic dispersion. Rather, the paper adopts an affective and aesthetic understanding of diaspora—one that emphasizes psychic distance, mnemonic attachment to homeland, and the internalization of place through memory. In this framework, diaspora is understood not as a demographic condition but as a structure of feeling, characterized by longing, absence, and imaginative return. Such an approach aligns with critical efforts to extend diaspora beyond strict migratory models toward what may be termed proto-diasporic or incipient diasporic sensibilities, particularly in colonial and transnational literary contexts predating modern global migrations. Reading "Our Casuarina Tree" through this lens does not claim that Dutt writes from within a formal diaspora; rather, it argues that her poetry anticipates diasporic affect by articulating emotional displacement and belonging-in-absence through memory, symbol, and aesthetic suggestion.

From its opening lines, "Our Casuarina Tree" imbues the titular image with layered emotional and mnemonic significance. Dutt's speaker begins with a vivid natural description—"Like a huge Python, winding round and round / The rugged trunk, indented deep with scars"—establishing the tree as a figure of endurance marked by time and memory (1927). What initially appears as botanical detail gradually reveals itself as symbolic: the Casuarina functions as a site where landscape and remembrance converge, binding nature to lived experience rather than mere visual grandeur. As the speaker clarifies, the tree is "not because of its magnificence" dear to her soul, but because it is inseparable from memories of childhood intimacy and familial presence (1927).

Memory in the poem operates as an affective force that collapses temporal and spatial distance. The recollection of playing beneath the tree with "sweet companions" evokes a world rendered inaccessible by both death and time: "Beneath it we have played; though years may roll, / O sweet companions, loved with love intense" (1927). The intensity of attachment is inseparable from loss, producing an emotional structure in which remembrance sustains connection while simultaneously underscoring absence. The Casuarina is thus not static within the speaker's imagination; its presence is animated by sound and sensation, particularly in the "dirge-like murmur" that transforms natural noise into a resonant echo of grief and longing.

Although Toru Dutt's experience does not correspond to a historically constituted diaspora, her transnational education and prolonged residence in Europe generate a form of affective distance that shapes the poem's emotional register. When the speaker imagines herself in distant locations such as "France or Italy," the Casuarina tree returns through "inner vision," suggesting that home persists not as physical presence but as an internalized and mnemonic construct (1927). In this sense, memory functions as both anchor and

mediator, enabling continuity across geographic separation while intensifying awareness of irretrievable loss.

The Casuarina tree thus emerges as a mnemonic and affective site that sustains emotional belonging in the absence of return. The speaker's desire that the tree be preserved among "deathless trees" and protected from "Oblivion's curse" reflects a poetic impulse to safeguard memory against erasure (1927). Through this gesture, "Our Casuarina Tree" moves beyond personal nostalgia to articulate a subtle structure of longing and attachment that anticipates later articulations of diasporic and postcolonial sensibility, grounded not in overt migration but in emotional displacement, memory, and imaginative return.

### Colonial, Transnational, and Postcolonial Contexts

A nuanced reading of Toru Dutt's "Our Casuarina Tree" requires situating the poem within the conditions of nineteenth-century colonial modernity, while avoiding the retrospective imposition of fully developed postcolonial paradigms. Written in English and shaped by transnational education, Dutt's poetry emerges from a historical moment in which Indian writers negotiated cultural expression within colonial linguistic forms while remaining emotionally invested in indigenous landscapes and familial memory. The poem is therefore best read as a culturally situated lyric that anticipates later concerns with memory, displacement, and belonging.

Although Dutt's writing predates the political assertiveness commonly associated with postcolonial literature, it nonetheless participates in a postcolonial sensibility grounded in affect and interiority rather than ideological confrontation. "Our Casuarina Tree" resists colonial domination not through explicit critique but through symbolic reclamation of an intimate Indian landscape as a site of emotional authority and continuity.

As Meenakshi Mukherjee (2000) [13] observes, early Indian English writing often negotiates colonial experience through affective and symbolic modes rather than overt political discourse. Dutt's poem exemplifies this tendency: the Casuarina tree is not mobilized as a nationalist emblem but functions as a repository of familial bonds, childhood memory, and emotional continuity across loss. In this sense, Dutt may be read as a transitional figure in Indian English literature whose work mediates colonial conditions through memory and inward reflection rather than political declaration, preparing the ground for the poem's sustained engagement with absence and affect examined in the following section.

### The Casuarina Tree as a Site of Memory, Belonging, and Diasporic Consciousness

A close reading of Toru Dutt's "Our Casuarina Tree" (1881) reveals that the poem's enduring emotional power derives not solely from its descriptive richness but from its nuanced negotiation of memory, absence, and belonging. The Casuarina tree functions as a central symbolic axis around which the speaker's affective experience of distance, memory, and belonging unfolds, anticipating what may be described as an incipient or proto-diasporic consciousness rather than a fully articulated diasporic condition. Through imagery, sound, and emotional suggestion, Dutt articulates a layered response to loss and displacement that resonates with the affective and psychic dimensions later theorized within diaspora studies (Clifford, 1994; Cohen, 2008) [6, 7].

The poem opens with an elaborate description of the Casuarina tree, emphasizing its physical endurance, resilience, and grandeur. The image of the "huge Python, winding round and round / the rugged trunk, indented deep with scars" (Dutt, 1927) [8] situates the tree as both a literal and symbolic presence within the landscape. While the imagery foregrounds rootedness and longevity, it also gestures toward permanence as a counterpoint to human transience and loss. The tree's endurance functions as a narrative anchor around which memory and grief are organized, reflecting the poem's broader engagement with temporality and emotional inheritance.

The speaker clarifies that the tree's significance extends beyond aesthetic appreciation: "Not because of its magnificence / Dear is the Casuarina to my soul" (Dutt, 1927) [8]. This renunciation of visual spectacle redirects attention from external beauty to affective value. The tree's meaning emerges from its association with lived experience—particularly childhood companionship and familial intimacy—which now survive only in memory. As a mnemonic site, the Casuarina operates as a symbolic repository of relational continuity amidst absence (Hall, 1990) [9].

The elegiac mode intensifies with the recollection of the speaker's "sweet companions" (Dutt, 1927) [8], now lost to death. Memory becomes inseparable from mourning, transforming recollection into a site of both pain and consolation. This interplay between remembrance and grief exemplifies a key affective dimension often associated with diasporic consciousness: the recognition that return—to people, places, or past configurations of belonging—is irreversibly foreclosed. The tree, as the sole surviving witness, embodies both continuity and loss, reinforcing the emotional contours of separation.

Auditory imagery further amplifies this affective displacement. The "dirge-like murmur" of wind through the Casuarina's branches externalizes the speaker's grief, transforming natural sound into emotional resonance (Dutt, 1927) [8]. Meaning emerges through suggestion rather than direct articulation, aligning with the Sanskrit aesthetic principle of *dhvani*, wherein significance is conveyed through implication and emotional reverberation rather than explicit statement (Anandavardhana, trans. 1997; Mādhava, trans. 2018).

The poem's proto-diasporic sensibility is most evident when the speaker imagines herself in distant lands—"France or Italy"—yet remains psychically anchored to the Casuarina tree (Dutt, 1927) [8]. Memory mediates this transnational condition, situating the speaker physically in one location while emotionally inhabiting another. The notion of "inner vision" underscores the internalization of home as an affective and imaginative construct, sustained through memory even as physical access becomes impossible (Cohen, 2008; Clifford, 1994) [6, 7].

The concluding plea to preserve the Casuarina from "Oblivion's curse" extends this logic into the symbolic realm (Dutt, 1927) [8]. Oblivion signifies not only forgetfulness but the erasure of relational and cultural memory. Through poetic inscription, Dutt resists such erasure, transforming literature into a vehicle of preservation that safeguards affective continuity across distance, loss, and time (Mukherjee, 2000; Ashcroft *et al.*, 2002) [4, 13].

### Dhvani and the Poetics of Silence in “Our Casuarina Tree”

The classical Indian aesthetic theory of Dhvani, articulated by Ānandavardhana in the *Dhvanyāloka* and further elaborated by Abhinavagupta, offers a productive framework for interpreting the implicit emotional and psychological dimensions of Toru Dutt’s “Our Casuarina Tree.” Central to Dhvani is the assertion that the essence of poetry lies not in literal meaning (*abhidhā*) nor merely in figurative or secondary meaning (*lakṣaṇā*), but in suggested meaning (*vyañjanā*), through which *rasa*—the aesthetic experience of emotion—is evoked (Ānandavardhana, trans. 2018; Abhinavagupta, trans. 1990) [3]. When applied to Dutt’s poem, Dhvani illuminates how affective states such as memory, absence, and longing are conveyed indirectly, allowing experiences later theorized within diasporic and postcolonial discourse to resonate without explicit articulation.

At the level of *abhidhā*, the poem recounts a speaker’s affectionate recollection of a Casuarina tree associated with childhood and familial intimacy. Yet the poem’s emotional force cannot be fully accounted for at this denotative level. Through *vyañjanā*, the tree acquires symbolic significance as a locus of continuity, emotional rootedness, and belonging, rendered fragile by temporal loss and spatial distance. Its symbolic potency derives from suggestion rather than declaration, embodying a tension between permanence and transience that structures the poem’s affective economy. In this way, the Casuarina tree becomes not merely an object of remembrance but a carrier of emotional meanings that exceed literal reference.

A defining feature of Dhvani is its reliance on implication, restraint, and the unsaid. In “Our Casuarina Tree,” the speaker does not explicitly name exile, displacement, or alienation; instead, these experiences are intimated through recurring motifs of memory, inner vision, and emotional attachment. The poem’s affective resonance emerges from what remains unspoken, inviting readers to participate in the imaginative reconstruction of absence. This aesthetic strategy aligns closely with Dhvani’s insistence that poetic meaning achieves intensity when suggestion predominates and overt exposition recedes.

The treatment of loss in the poem exemplifies this logic of suggestion. The speaker’s “sweet companions,” remembered from childhood, are never mourned through direct elegiac declaration (1927). Their absence is conveyed obliquely through the tree’s enduring presence and the speaker’s reflective engagement with it. The contrast between what persists and what has vanished generates a layered affective response in which memory and mourning coexist. Emotion is intensified not through explicit lamentation but through the silent recognition of irretrievable loss, a process central to Dhvani’s aesthetic operation.

From this perspective, absence in the poem acquires not only temporal but also spatial dimensions. The Casuarina tree remains rooted in the homeland, while the speaker’s consciousness inhabits distant spaces, recalling it through memory rather than immediate perception. Although the geographical divide is never directly foregrounded, it shapes the poem’s emotional texture. Dhvani thus provides a mechanism through which affective displacement is aestheticized: separation is experienced as an undercurrent rather than a narrated event, allowing longing and

attachment to emerge through resonance rather than statement.

The poem’s affective register is further clarified through its engagement with *rasa*. The dominant emotional tone may be identified as *karuṇa rasa* (pathos), evoked through the interplay of remembrance, loss, and longing. This pathos is not dramatized overtly; instead, it is suggested through imagery and sound, most notably in the “dirge-like murmur” of the wind through the Casuarina’s branches. The soundscape functions as an externalization of grief, enabling readers to experience sorrow aesthetically rather than as an explicitly narrated emotion. Alongside *karuṇa*, elements of *śānta rasa* (tranquillity) emerge in the speaker’s contemplative acceptance of loss and her turn toward poetic preservation as a form of solace. Dhvani enables this subtle coexistence of emotional registers, allowing multiple affects to resonate without hierarchical resolution.

Symbolism in Dhvani derives its power from contextual and affective resonance rather than fixed allegorical meaning. The Casuarina tree exemplifies this principle. While botanically described at the surface level, it functions suggestively as a repository of memory, identity, and emotional continuity. Its rootedness implicitly contrasts with the speaker’s mobility, gesturing toward a condition of belonging sustained through remembrance rather than physical presence. The speaker’s plea to protect the tree from “Oblivion’s curse” extends this symbolism further, transforming personal memory into an act of aesthetic preservation (1927). Writing itself becomes a means of safeguarding emotional and cultural continuity against erasure by time and distance.

In this sense, “Our Casuarina Tree” exemplifies a poetics of silence in which meaning emerges through restraint, implication, and affective resonance. The poem does not explicitly articulate colonial displacement, exile, or diasporic identity; yet these experiences are implicitly registered through its emotional architecture. The speaker’s present circumstances remain largely unspoken, allowing memory and absence to occupy the foreground. Such silence operates not as a lack but as an aesthetic strategy, consistent with both Dhvani and later postcolonial and diasporic poetic modes that privilege suggestion over declaration.

By reading “Our Casuarina Tree” through the lens of Dhvani, it becomes evident that classical Indian aesthetic theory provides a nuanced framework for understanding affective displacement in early Indo-Anglian poetry. The poem’s emotional depth arises from suggested meaning rather than explicit exposition, transforming personal remembrance into an experience of broader aesthetic resonance. While Dutt does not articulate diaspora in a historical or political sense, her poetic technique anticipates affective modes that later become central to diasporic and postcolonial literature. Dhvani thus bridges form and feeling, revealing how memory, absence, and longing are structurally embedded within the poem’s aesthetic design, rendering “Our Casuarina Tree” a subtle and sophisticated meditation on belonging-in-absence.

### Conclusion

This study has re-examined Toru Dutt’s “Our Casuarina Tree” beyond its conventional reading as a nostalgic or purely elegiac lyric, foregrounding instead its nuanced engagement with memory, absence, and belonging within a colonial and transnational context. By situating the poem

within nineteenth-century colonial modernity and reading it through the classical aesthetic framework of Dhvani, the analysis has demonstrated that the poem's enduring significance lies not in overt representations of displacement or exile, but in its subtle articulation of affective dislocation. In this light, Dutt's poem may be understood as an early and sophisticated meditation on emotional distance and remembrance, anticipating thematic concerns that later become central to postcolonial and diasporic literary expression.

Through close textual analysis, the Casuarina tree emerges as more than a personal emblem of childhood memory. It functions as a mnemonic and affective site through which continuity is sustained across temporal and spatial divides. Its rooted permanence contrasts with the speaker's implied mobility, symbolically mediating tensions between constancy and loss, presence and absence. This dynamic resonates with affective dimensions later theorized in diaspora studies, wherein attachment, memory, and longing persist despite geographical separation (Clifford, 1994; Cohen, 2008)<sup>16, 71</sup>, without requiring the poem to be situated within a fully realized historical diaspora.

The application of Dhvani theory proves particularly productive in illuminating the poem's latent emotional and aesthetic complexity. By privileging suggested meaning (*vyañjanā*) over direct articulation, "Our Casuarina Tree" communicates states of longing, grief, and continuity through silence, imagery, and sonic resonance. Experiences such as separation and loss are not declared explicitly; rather, they are evoked through the aesthetic experience of *karuṇa* and *śānta* rasas, generated by memory, auditory imagery, and contemplative reflection. Dhvani thus enables a reading that locates affective displacement within aesthetic form, emphasizing implication and resonance rather than narrative declaration.

Moreover, the integration of Dhvani with postcolonial and diaspora-oriented critical perspectives underscores the value of indigenous aesthetic frameworks for interpreting early Indo-Anglian literature. While postcolonial criticism has frequently relied on Western theoretical paradigms, this study demonstrates that classical Indian poetics offer equally rigorous tools for apprehending the emotional and psychological textures of texts shaped by colonial and transnational conditions. Such a methodological synthesis not only enriches critical interpretation but also situates Toru Dutt's poetic practice within a broader indigenous theoretical lineage.

"Our Casuarina Tree" thus emerges as a text occupying a liminal space between colonial lyricism and an emergent postcolonial sensibility, between personal elegy and a more diffuse affective orientation toward distance and belonging. Its restrained articulation of memory, longing, and emotional rootedness affirms Dutt's position as a transitional figure in Indian English poetry, whose work anticipates later literary negotiations of displacement in less explicit but no less resonant ways. Read through the combined lenses of affective displacement and Dhvani aesthetics, the poem transcends narrow generic or historical categorization.

In conclusion, this study argues that the aesthetic strategies employed by Toru Dutt—suggestion, symbolic resonance, and controlled silence—enable "Our Casuarina Tree" to articulate belonging-in-absence with remarkable subtlety. Memory, absence, and longing are rendered not as abstract

themes but as embodied affective experiences, positioning the poem as both a significant achievement in early Indo-Anglian poetry and a work whose emotional intelligence anticipates later postcolonial and diasporic literary modes.

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