

THE POETRY OF SAROJINI NAIDU: A STUDY

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The enlightened Indians of the early nineteenth century strongly felt the need of associating their countrymen to the contemporary cultural forces of the outside world. The studies in English and Western Science had been strongly welcomed. This not only developed a scientific and rational approach to life in the natives but also encouraged the natives to develop a popular enthusiasm and a special fascination for English language and literature. The Indians started using English for creative expression through poetry even before Macaulay's Minutes (1835). Evidences can be found in Henry Louis Vivian Derozio who published his volume of poems in 1823 and Kashiprasad Ghose (1809-73) who published his volume *The Shair and the Other Poems* in 1830. Later Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824-73) was highly inspired by the English Romantic poets chiefly Byron and the classical writers like Homer and Dante. His *Visions of the Past* (1848) and *The Captive Ladie* (1849) reflect references to Indian imagery through English language. A greater attempt came from Toru Dutta (1856-77) whose *Ancient Ballads* and *Legends of Hindustan* (1883) purely harmonizes the Indian and foreign elements. Her early death left the task of genuine verification incomplete. Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) came to the field to carry forward this task to the desired perfection.

The pioneers in the field of Indian writing in English were highly influenced by British models. As a result their versification is, to a greater extent, imitative. However, they sowed the seeds that gained enough ambience in years to come for growth and fructification. Sarojini Naidu was born to Bengali parents having a strong cultural prestige in Hyderabad. She inherited the poetic instinct from her mother and started writing poetry at her early eleven. At the age of 15 she suffered colossally from the bitter experiences on the occasion of the sad demise of her dear little brother. Gradually her outlook on life grew more serious and mature. She discovered the correspondences between human life and nature. As a poetess she looked at the affairs of life and living and reciprocated her poetic feelings with the help of an authentic Indian atmosphere.

Sarojini had madly fallen in love with Dr. Gobindarajulu Naidu at the age of 15 and stubbornly decided to marry him without considering any argument. But the parents sent the young girl to England where she started studying as a shining student of King's College or Girton College. She came in contact with the members of the Rhymers' Club and also made close friendship with Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse. During this sojourn she developed a close proximity with nature in England - with its moods and tones, scenes and sights, trees and flowers, robins and skylarks and so on. Thus, in her early poetical career she frankly followed the English poets like Keats, Shelley Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites. At this stage her friend Edmund Gosse advised her not to imitate the English authors cleverly but to look into the heart

of her motherland to find out fresh themes and techniques. Though, for the time being, it was a matter of disappointment for her, she followed the advice and tried to set her poems upon the Indian background constructed by the hills, mountains, gardens, temples, rivers meadows, daily workers of her mother land. She returned homeward in 1898, married Dr. Naidu and sharpened her sensibility as an Indian poetess.

Sarojini's first major collection is *The Golden Threshold* which was published in 1905 in London. The very title of the volume interprets her entry into her poetic home or poetic haven. This brought her fame and recognition both in the East and the West. The poems included in the volume are strictly permeated with the ethos of the East. But they, as the best songs do, cross the geographical boundary to disseminate the Eastern colour over the West with fresh and firm appeal and quick and delicate touch. Hers are the lyrical songs that come out of a gifted temperament which can sing like a bird with a quality of magical musicality, a quality that specifically defines and depicts the East through the language of the West. After a period of seven years her second volume of poetry *The Bird of Time* was published in London. Far more mature are the lyrics which this second volume includes. By that time Sarojini had got involved into the domestic chores of a housewife in the Naidu family, given births to four children and simultaneously thrown herself into the social works particularly those which the motherland, in her state of bondage, was badly in need of. She had already been directed by the great saint and soldier Gokhale to dream about the Motherland. Instead of such multifarious engagements her lyrics in *The Bird of Time* display her powerful lyric energy and enriched expressive vivacity. More intensely they reveal the heart of India full of native passions and principles. Sarojini Naidu's next volume was published in 1917 with the title *The Broken Wing*. The very title is based on her own answer to the question by Gokhale, "why should a song bird like you have a broken wing?"

Or a weak bleeding pinion daunt or tire
My flight to the high realms of my desire?
Behold! I rise to meet the destined spring
And scale the stars upon my broken wing!

(*The Sceptred Flute* 145)

The poems capture her optimistic views about India's future, about the then scenario of her motherland that needed an overall refinement for productive prospect.

To stress upon the thematic pattern in her poetry one should categorize her major themes into four groups. The simple joys and hopes, fears and pains of the common folks in India constitute her important themes. This folk theme has become typically her own and she dexterously handles this theme with her original techniques and treatments. Most of the lyrics in *The Golden Threshold* tell about the common people of mainly rural India. They portray how the fishermen, snake charmers, weavers, farmers, dancers, wanderings singers, bangle-sellers, corn-grinders, vendors, palanquin bearers live their simple lives following their humble occupation. Through this panorama of active living the poetess displays the continuous flow of Indian life that goes on for the centuries. "The palanquin Bearers" is one of the most beautiful lyrics in this class. As a folk song it expresses the experiences of the bearers who march on the street with the carriage:

Lightly, O lightly, we bear her along,
She sways like a flower in the wind of our song;

She skims like a bird on the foam of a stream,
 She floats like a laugh from the lips of a dream

(The Sceptred Flute 3)

Another important lyric is the “Wandering singers”. In this poem the poetess presents the wandering singers who lead their livelihoods by singing songs here and there and entertaining people with their songs. Their songs are about the cities that have lost the glory once appreciated and enjoyed highly; they are about the beauties and joys of women who have been dead for a long time. Thus the poetess sings of those who sing about many a local or national legend:

Our lays are of cities, whose luster is shed,
 The laughter and beauty of women long dead;
 The sword of old battles, the crown of old kings
 And happy and simple and sorrowful things.

(The Sceptred Flute 4)

In “The Bangle-Sellers” the poetess writes about the traditional folk-customs of bangle wearing and shows how each of the stages in woman’s life is related to appropriate bangles:

Lustrous tokens of radiant lives
 For happy daughters and happy wives.

(The Sceptred Flute 108)

Similar treatment is available in “The Coromandel Fishers “and” The Snake charmers”. “Indian Weavers” is a glaring example of folk-song where the poem runs in a question-answer pattern. Weaving is a folk vocation. The poetess asks some weavers why they weave such a gay garment and draws their brief and simple answer:

Weavers, wearing at break of day,
 Why do you weave a garment so gay?.....
 Blue as the wing of a halcyon wild,
 We weave the robes of a new-born child.

(The Sceptred Flute 5)

The theme of the poem is about the human life that passes through its three stages namely birth, marriage and death. This simple folk-song provides layer of meanings about man’s journey from birth to death. Sarojini is successful in drawing the folk spirit of the Indian masses through their diverse occupations, customs, traditions and beliefs. She has dealt with all the aspects of folk-life.

Sarojini had a close affinity with nature. Nature exercised a productive inspiration over her mind. In her early career she had been attracted to the natural beauty of England. Later in India she was equally enchanted with the manifestations of natural beauty. Thus nature constitutes one of the major themes of her poetry. Her works record her enthusiastic responses to the sights, sounds, and scents of nature. Regarding this attitude she is sensuous like Keats. The poem entitled “Spring” is a good example where the poetess depicts the beauties of the season:

Young leaves grow green on the banyan twigs.
 And red on the peepal tree,
 The honey-birds pipe to the budding figs,
 And honey-blooms call the bee.

(The Sceptred Flute 87)

Her major nature poems includes “In Praise of Gulmohur Blossoms”, “Golden Cassia” and “Champak Blossoms” which are decked with the images of unalloyed beauty of nature:

Or the mystic blaze of the gem that burns
 On the brow of a serpent king?

(The Sceptred Flute 94)

Sarojini loves flowers and expresses their splendour in her poetry. Flowers are strewn everywhere in her poetic canvas. The gulmohur flowers are of the highest glamour to her. The flowers in the “Golden Cassia” also add to the grandeur of her floral setting. She describes them as the fragments of some new-fallen stars or golden lamps or golden pitchers etc. The Champak blossoms are of variegated petals. Their sanctity is praised in her poetry for they are dedicated to god as oblations. Mrs. Naidu Shows a profound fascination for lotus which is significant in many ways in Indian myth and religion. In her “To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus” she refers to the Idol of the Lord who is seated on a throne of lotus. In another occasion the poetess pays tribute to Gandhi by comparing him with a sacred and sublime lotus. Nature for her is not ‘red in tooth and claw’. It sustains her mind and provides her with a peaceful ambience where she can breathe in contentment and tranquility. This is evident in her “June sunset”:

Here shall my heart find its haven of calm,
 By rush-fringed rivers and rain-fed Streams
 That glimmer thro’ meadows of lily and palm.

(The Sceptred Flute 192)

The theme of love also gives her poetry another dimension. “A Rajput Love Song” is a magnificent specimen of love - ballad. It brings its readers to the romantic medieval world of Rajput Chivalry. The poem depicts the romantic affairs between Parvati, the princess and Amar Singh, the warrior Prince. The poetess uses her elegant similes and metaphors to paint the passions of the partners:

Haste, O wild-deer hours, to the meadows of the sunset!
 Fly, wild stallion day, to the pastures of the West!
 Come, O tranquil night, with your soft consenting darkness,
 And bear me to the fragrance of my Beloved’s breast!

(The Sceptred Flute 81)

“A Persian Love Song” presents how the lovers are linked to each other through love. The poem confirms that it is love that controls the feelings and conducts of both the love makers. In “Ecstasy” Sarojini deals with the ecstatic fervours of the lovers and shows how the lovers experience their affairs:

Cover mine eyes, O my Love!
 Mine eyes that are weary of bliss
 As of light that is poignant and strong
 O silence my lips with a kiss
 My lips that are weary of song!

(The Sceptred Flute 25)

In “Love Song from the North” and “The Garden Vigil” the beloved can no more bear the pain of estrangement. Similar aspects of love and languishment, union and separation are found in many other poems like “Caprice”, “Destiny”, “Longing”, “The Festival of Memory” and so on. Sarojini’s love poetry expresses a sensitive and passionate spirit. It is not only an expression of Hindu philosophy but and

Enriched version of other philosophies. She is a successful love poet because she has enriched the Hindu tradition of love.

Life and death constitute an important theme for Naidu. Her sonnet “Love and Death” depicts a mood of utter despair. One can hear here Death’s triumph over Love. In the poem entitled “To the God of Pain” one can see the unwilling priestess exhausted and emaciated:

Let me depart with faint limbs let me creep
To some dim shade and sink me down to sleep

(*The Sceptred Flute* 37)

Such poems show how a spirit is crushed and silenced by fate. Sarojini is found to pray for the spiritual peace, for Moksha or Nirvana, the highest and ultimate aim of human life in “To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus” Here she concludes that human life is full of sorrows. For her, life is a constant succession of pains. Despite his helplessness, man continues to desire for the mystic bliss which is available in his union with the divine:

With futile hands we seek to gain
Our inaccessible desire
But nought shall conquer or control
The heavenward hunger of our soul.

(*The Sceptred Flute* 62)

Sarojini was deeply attracted to the spirit of unity that lies under the apparent spirit of diversity of her native land. She was a patriot poet. She had no provincial or religious bias. The Indians may be from different religions but they are the children of Mother India. She wants to suggest this conviction in her “The Call to Evening Prayer” Where the followers of multiple faiths offer their prayers to god who is worshipped in many forms. In the varied range of her poetry she tries to touch diverse religious faiths and rites. In “The prayer of Islam” She addresses Allah in different names and authenticates that her treatment of religion is free from all prejudices and full of tolerance and sympathy.

Sarojini is born of Indian soil. The very soul of India finds expression in her works. Her images, diction music and melody - all contribute to her Indianness. Her poetry is a constant source of joy for the readers.

Work Cited

Naidu, Sarojini. *The Sceptred Flute*. Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1946