

Sarojini Naidu: A voice of Indian Culture

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Received: 25.05.2017

Accepted: 30.05.2017

ABSTRACT

Sarojini Naidu has been a veteran political activist during freedom movement and after India being free. She played a leading role during the 'Civil Disobedience Movement', the 'Quit India Movement' in 1942. She was a distinguished poet, renowned freedom fighter and one of the great orators of her time and was given the title of 'Bharatiya Kokila' ('The Nightingale of India').

The paper throws the light on her distinguished and memorable status as a voice of Indian culture.

THE RETROSPECTIVE

Sarojini Naidu was the first Indian woman to become the President of the Indian National Congress and the first woman to become the Governor of a state in India. Her first collection of poems, 'The Golden Threshold, The Feather of The Dawn, The Bird of Time: Songs of Life, Death & the Spring, The Broken Wing: Songs of Love, Death and the Spring, including The Gift of India' were admired by politicians like Gopal Krishna Gokhale. Aldous Huxley wrote 'It has been our good fortune, while in Bombay, to meet Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, the newly elected President of the All-India Congress and a woman who combines in the most remarkable way great intellectual power with charm, sweetness with courageous energy, a wide culture with originality, and earnestness with humour. If all Indian politicians are like Mrs. Naidu, then the country is fortunate, indeed'.¹

The poems of her are to be included as 'Damayante to Nala in the Hour of Exile, Ecstasy, Indian Dancers, The Indian Gypsy, Indian Love-Song, Indian Weavers, In Salutation to the Eternal Peace, In the Forest, Ramamuratham, Nightfall in the City of Hyderabad, Palanquin Bearers, The Pardah Nashin, Past and Future, The Queen's Rival, The Royal Tombs of Golconda, The Snake-Charmer, Song of a Dream, Song of Radha, the milkmaid, The Soul's Prayer, Suttee, To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus, To the God of Pain, Wandering Singers, Street Cries, Alabaster, Autumn Song, Bangle Sellers, The Coromandal Fishers, To youth, By the ruler'.

When we go through her poems we find that folk theme is one of the dominant themes in Sarojini Naidu's poetry. 'In the Bazaars of Hyderabad' deals with one such theme, the loveliness and vibrancy of a traditional Indian bazaar in the city of Hyderabad. The poet has vividly described the bazaar with vendors selling different kinds of wares. Sarojini Naidu visits the stalls given by merchants, maidens, peddlers, goldsmiths, fruit sellers, musicians and flower girls. She questions them about what they are selling and who in turn politely answers. Through the poem, we see the bazaars witness both sorrows and joys of life. They witness happy moments such as wedding when the bazaar is crowded with people buying garlands, jewellery *etc.* and also during the festive occasions like Holi, Diwali, Eid *etc.* The bazaars also witness occasions of sadness like death when kings and soldiers die and the flower girls are seen weaving wreaths and sheets of white flowers to be used for the dead people's homage and grave.

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Another theme in the poem is the *Swadeshi Movement*. This theme is not explicitly mentioned in the poem. She asks the people of India to boycott the foreign goods and buy products from the typical Indian markets which she has beautifully depicted in her poem 'In the Bazaars of Hyderabad'. Therefore, we can say that all her poems are suffused with Indian spirit, Indian customs, traditions, Indian men and women, Indian festivals and rituals, Indian myths and legends, Indian locations like bazaars and fairs are the dominant themes of her poetry. Some poems depict the toil of ordinary people, some sing of the feeling of brotherhood, some portray the joy of celebrating a festival together by the village folks. Like Tagore, Sarojini Naidu was also a great lover of humanity, and throughout her life she strived to serve the humble and the oppressed. Sarojini Naidu painted beautiful pictures of various occupations as the weavers, fishermen, bangle sellers *etc.*

'Coromandel Fishers' is a lyric enriched with vivid imagery and folk culture of the Coromandel Coast of India. It depicts the relationship of fishermen with the world of nature. Naidu's poem 'Palanquin Bearers' in *The Golden Threshold* depicts the tradition of carrying a bride in a palanquin or sedan. Dwivedi remarked: 'It is a poem of great artistic beauty and has a rhythmic swing in it which is well in accord with the soft onward movement of the palanquin-bearers'.²

The palanquin bearers sing of the beauty of the bride and carry the palanquin with delight and with poise:

Softly, O softly we bear her along,
She hangs like a star in the dew of our song;
She springs like a beam on the brow of the tide,
She falls like a tear from the eyes of a bride.
Lightly, O lightly we glide and we sing,
We bear her along like a pearl on a string. (1958, 7-12)

'Street Cries' by Sarojini Naidu is written on the vendors who sell their goods in the streets of India. Even today though India is having a hike in its economy, we have large scale business flourishing all around but street hawkers still are seen delivering their products door to door.

When dawn's first cymbals beat upon the sky,
Rousing the world to labour's various cry,
To tend the flock, to bind the mellowing grain,
From ardent toil to forge a little gain,
And fasting men go forth on hurrying feet,
Buy bread, buy bread rings down the eager streets. (1958, 1-6)

The pivotal theme in the poem is the pattern of a life-time in which the Indian woman assumes the full control of the family structure and gains both self-assurance and dynastic centrality. The sacred trinity of the Hindu mythology were unified into a Single Deity, Dattatreya, by Anasuya, the Mother of the Equal Eye, through her chastity. *Coromandel Fishers* is a vocational song, expressing the fishermen's sense of belonging and identity with the sea. It reveals their professional pride in fusing their tools and their own purposes into effective action. It projects the tribal awareness of a sense of structure in things, which is organically linked with their fluctuating fortunes.

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‘The Prayer of Islam’, which was composed on Id-uz-Zoha, in the year 1915, shows the acquaintance of Sarojini Naidu with the Islamic mode of worship. God is omniscient, omnipresent. This poem mentions some of the 99 beautiful Arabic names of Allah or God as used by the followers of Islam such as Hameed, Hafeez, Ghani, Ghaffar, Wahab, Waheed, Quadeer, Rahman and Raheem. This poem expresses the Islamic faith and is, therefore, significantly entitled. ‘Wandering Beggars’ presents Muslim Fakirs who roam here and there uttering the name of Allah :

‘From the threshold of Dawn
On we wander, always on
Till the friendly light be gone
Ya’ Allah! Ya’ Allah!’³

Thus, Sarojini Naidu was a gifted artist, whose poetry is appreciated for its birdlike quality and sophisticated style. The three volumes of her poems, ‘The Golden Threshold (1905), The Bird of Time (1912) and The Broken Wing (1917)’, occupy a place of eminence in the history of Indo-Anglican poetry. Lyricism, symbolism, imagery, mysticism and native favour, are the remarkable qualities of her poetry. She admired the beauty around her whether it was related to the world of nature or varied colours of Indian cultural heritage. Naidu’s themes are indigenous as advised by Edmund Gosse and capture the spirit of India.

Sarojini Naidu draws inspiration from the world of animals and birds and insects. Her poems are full of references to gazelles, deer, elephants, serpents, fire-flies, glowworms, dragon-flies, bulbuls, koels, papihas, peacocks, pigeons, doves and vultures. But she is somewhat partial to the birds like the eagle maybe for its force and energy or to the bulbul for its grace and delicacy. Birds are the messengers and envoys of love, pain and joy. The bird is also a code for the poet, signifying flight or ascent, escape or transcendence, aspiration or memory. In fact, three of her poetical collections have their titles drawn from the bird imagery: ‘The Bird of Time, The Broken Wing, and The Feather of Dawn’. The third collection of Sarojini Naidu’s poems, The Broken Wing was published in 1917. It has sixty-one lyrics. Tagore praised the poems saying, “your poems in ‘The Broken Wing’ seem to be made of tears and fire like the clouds of a July evening glowing with the muffled passion of sunset”.

A clear picture of the flower lotus can be seen in Sarojini Naidu’s poem addressed to the Buddha, seated upon his Lotus. But nowhere has Sarojini Naidu expressed symbolism of lotus, more effectively than in her poem addressed to Mahatma Gandhi. ‘The Lotus’ is a sonnet dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi. Gokhale initiated Sarojini to the path of politics while Mahatma Gandhi who gave her the direction. Sarojini Naidu chose the title “The Lotus” as the lotus is a sacred flower and it is associated with Hindu gods and goddesses – Vishnu, Brahma and Lakshmi. Mahatma Gandhi is addressed as the flower lotus due to his sacred and sublime character. The name of Gandhi ji does not occur anywhere in the poem but the mystic lotus symbolizes Gandhi ji. The mystic lotus symbol stands for Gandhi ji whose name does not occur in the body of the poem. The lotus symbol is used to elevate the character and personality of Gandhi ji to sublime heights. The versatile genius of Mahatma Gandhi was not shaken by the temporary storms of misfortune and difficulties. Mahatma Gandhi was the pillar of strength for India and its people. Mahatma Gandhi, though physically dead, has become immortal, an incarnation of Brahma, due to his noble thoughts and sacred deeds:

‘But who could win thy secret, who attain

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Thine ageless beauty born of Brahma's breath,
Or pluck thine immortality, who art
Co eval with the Lords of Life and Death?"⁴

Spring is the harbinger of joy and novelty. It kindles the life-fuse in the trees, flowers and birds and butterflies. It draws the human beings into the eddies of the vital flood. Spring is the moment, the season, and the cycle of Love, while Kamala slowly lingers in the grove where temple bells ring and 'Krishna plays on his bamboo flute an idol of love and spring'. Sarojini Naidu is fond of imagery of '*Vasanta*' (spring). She draws a loving picture of all the natural objects and makes the world a wonderful place to live in. She provides us a chance to listen to the melodious songs of various birds and the buzzing of bees. Her song is ablaze with Gulmohar and Cassia, with the Champak and Jasmine; we wander with her into Pomegranate gardens of mellowing to watch a June Sunset. In the poem 'June Sunset' she constitutes a genuine, poetic picture.

"An Ox-cart stumbles upon the rocks,
And a wistful musk pursues the breeze
From a Shepherd's pipe as he gathers his flocks
Under the pipal-trees"⁵

Nature is a relief from the conflicts of the worldly life. In 'Summer Woods', the poet says:

"O, I am tired of painted roofs and soft and silken floors
And long for wind-blown canopies of crimson Gulmohar"⁶

She expresses her longing to fly where cassia-woods are breaking into flame, and koels call from flowery glade and glen. She wishes to lie beneath the boughs of Tamarind, and Molasri and Neem. She wants to bind their brows with jasmine sprays and play on carven flute; to roam along the river's bank and bathe in the water-lily pools.³⁰ For Sarojini Naidu, Nature is a '*Sanctuary of Peace*.'

The poem 'The Time of Roses' reflects intense perfume of lovely roses which can be seen anywhere in abundance. The crimson roses with their magical perfume captivate the poet so intensely that she measures woman's entire life with the season of flowers:

'Bind me on the pyre of roses,
Burn me in a fire of roses,
Crown me with the rose of love!'⁷

Though the poem lacks the logical sequence, as there cannot be any crowning for a person after being burnt and reduced to ashes, it enchants us with the floral setting. The poetry of Sarojini Naidu made a mark of prominence in the arena of Indian poetry in English and is an important part of women's writing. She possessed sharp aesthetic sensibility and was an admirer of the varied colours of Indian traditions and folk life. Naidu's themes are indigenous as advised by Edmund Gosse and capture the spirit of India. Meeta Ajay Khanna – The Poetry of Sarojini Naidu: A Canvas of Vibrant Pageantry of Folk Traditions was Edmond Gosse who inspired Sarojini Naidu to infuse in her poems, the feature of Indianness.

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