

Sarojini Naidu's Poetry: Reflection of Indian Myths, Legends and Folktales

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Abstract: As a celebrated daughter of modern India, Sarojini fell in the long tradition of Indian women writers since the Vedic age: in the tradition of singers like Vishveshwara and Ghosa, of Gargi, Maitreyi and Sulabha, the debaters in the *Upanishads*; of Sumana, Shyama, Sangha, Multa, Sumangala, Sanghmitra and Rajyashri and many others. Sarojini has been hailed "as an ardent, versatile and dynamic genius". Sarojini's four volumes of poetry reveal a steadily maturing poetic personality and a steady growth of her poetic sensibility and imagination. Initially, her verses were English in form and content, but the wise suggestions of Sir Gosse diverted her from it to native land for themes and raw materials. Sarojini's poetry presents a kaleidoscope of Indian scenes, sights, sounds and experiences transmuted into a fantastic vision of colour and rhythm. Her themes are mostly familiar and even insignificant but for the fact that they are vivified through the magic glass of her imagination. We find in her poems common men and women, dancers and wandering singers, weavers and fishermen, palanquin-bearers and bangle sellers, snake-charmers and flower-girls, street vendors and merchants, milkmaids and boatmen, and many other personalities, festivals, and gods. Sarojini Naidu was fascinated by the diversity of India's religions and tried to understand each of them with sympathy. She believed, like Mahatma Gandhi, that the fundamental message of all religions was the same. They all awarded the highest value to love. But the external expressions of different religions in customs, festivals, rites and modes of worship also interested her. Hinduism was, naturally, the dominant influence on her spiritual evolution. In reading her poems one feels again and again that only a Hindu (perhaps only a Hindu woman) could have written them.

Keywords : Kaleidoscope; ephemeral; fundamental message; mode of worship; dominant.

Introduction

Sarojini was born on the thirteenth of February, 1879. She grew up in an atmosphere of culture and refinement. Her earliest memories were those

of the lavish hospitality which her mother offered to guests and visitors. The house was 'a cross between a museum and a zoo', full of per animals, curios, bric-a-brac, and a medley of strange people - 'astronomers, scholars, mystics, beggars and prices'. Her mother was an accomplished cook. The kitchen was full of delicacies and a dozen unexpected guests could be fed at any moment.

Many languages were spoken in the Chattopadhyaya household. All the children were multilingual. Sarojini's eldest brother, Virendranath, is reputed to have been fluent in sixteen languages. Sarojini herself spoke Urdu, Telugu and English. Her parents spoke to the servants in Telugu, to the children in English or Hindustani and to each other in Bengali. Sarojini never ceased to regret. Curiously enough, as a child she resisted English for a long time. Her father once punished her for this stubbornness. He locked her up in a room and ferused to let her out until she had composed a stanza in English.

The Nizam offered a scholarship, Sarojini was sent to England. When Sarojini was introduced to Edmund Gosse she showed him some of her poems. He was disappointed. He felt that she had been 'Anglicising her feelings'. Gosse advised her to forget the robins and the skylarks of the English countryside and to 'set her poems firmly among the mountains, the temples ... to be a genuine India poet of the Deccan, not a clever ... imitator of the English classic'. While she valued the advice offered by the famous English critic, it is hardly fair to suggest that she made a 'transition from skylarks to bulbuls' because of his 'tutorial revision of her sensibility'. Edmund Gosse said of them, "These poems will be found as luminous in lightring up the dark places of the East as any contribution of savant or historian". (56) George Sampson made the following observations about her:

Sarojini Naidu (1879) made a more definite contribution to English poetry. Her ardent literacy temperament was fired by the poetic spirit of the Nineties and she began writing verses that are entirely English in matter and from, but was advised to turn to her native land for themes... Some of her songs are little more than exotically sentimental utterances that might have come from

an English writer who knew the East by hearsay; but others give vivid vignettes of native life and some embody the spirit of Oriental devotion. In general, her work is more remarkable for its command of English than for any revelation of India. (78)

Sarojini's poetic career commenced with the inspiration of Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symons. She drew the attention of the literary world after the publication of her first book of verse, *The Golden Threshold*, in the year 1905. The book carried an introductory essay by Arthur Symons. It was a great achievement in the career of Sarojini Naidu. She was a prominent Indian woman of the 20th century. She was an outstanding political leader and an eminent creative writer. She commanded respect of all around her. She possessed a "colourful personality". She always used rich and selective dresses. Her speech created a sense of optimism in the minds of the Indians which ultimately brought about the freedom of the country. *The Golden Threshold*, the first volume of poetry by Sarojini Naidu, was dedicated to Sir Edmund Gosse, who first showed her "the way to the Golden Threshold" of poetry. Gosse wrote an introduction to the second volume of her poetry, *The Bird of Time*, and in it he mentioned that Sarojini was already known to the literary world as the most accomplished living poet of India, and that she needed no introduction at all. But as he could not displease a dear valued friend.

All the poems of Sarojini Naidu have been published in four volumes – *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912), *The Broken Wing* (1917) and *The Feather of Dawn*, published posthumously in 1961. *The Golden Threshold* was a best-seller. All the copies of the first edition were sold out in the year of publication, and the second edition was brought up without delay. The title of the volume was glittering and symbolic. Sarojini's poetry seems to sing itself as if her swift thoughts and strong emotions sprang into lyrics of themselves. There are the same unity and spontaneity about such poems, as that "To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus", in which her wisdom has play – How shall we reach the great Unknown *Nirvana* of thy Lotus throne ?

"The flute-Player of Brindaban" is a song of a devotee of Lord Krishna, who is enchanted by the magic music of the divine flute. Sarojini's own note on this poem says thus – Krishna, the Divine Flute-player of

Brindaban, who plays the tune of the Infinite that lures every Hindu heart away from mortal cares and attachments.

“Lakshmi, the Lotus-Born” was composed on the day of Lakshmi Puja Day, 1915. This hymn to the Goddess of Fortune is an invocation of the worshippers who seek blessings of the goddess to prosper their cradles and kindred and cattle and cherish their ‘hearth-fires and coffers and corn’.

“Raksha Bandhan” throws light on one of the Hindu custom being celebrated on the day of Raksha Bandhan—that of tying bracelets of floss by the women on the wrists of their brothers. The bracelets are the tokens of their love and good wishes:

A garland how frail of design,
Our spirits to clasp and entwine
In devotion unstained and unbroken,
How slender a circle and sign
Of secret, deep pledges unspoken!
(The Feather of the Dawn 10)

The editorial note reads, On Raksha Bandhan Day, following an ancient Rajput custom, Hindu women tie bracelets of gold-twined silk on the wrists of their brothers and those they adopt as their brothers.

In “The Imam Bara”, the poetess depicts one of the facets of Muslim culture. The following note is given in the poem, “The Imam Bara is a Chapel of lamentation where Mussulmans of the Shiah Community celebrate the tragic Martyrdom of Ali, Hassan, and Hussain during the mourning month of Moharram”. (212)

“The Bird Sanctuary” depicts many kinds of birds perching in the serene garden of God—the bulbul, the oriole, the honey bird and shama, the wandering gull, the hoopoe, the king fisher, the wild gay pigeons, and jade-green gipsy parrots. These birds continue their chorus throughout the Festival of Dawn. In the end, the poetess longs to share the pleasure of the birds:

In your gracious garden there is joy
and fostering freedom,
Nesting place and singing space for every
feathered thing,
O Master of the Birds, grant sanctuary and shelter

Also to a homing bird that bears a broken wing. (13-18)

“Kanhaya” is the first poem of this section. At first, we find complaints of Farmers, Milkmaids and Priests against Kanhaya, then those of Village Girls and Village Headmen, and lastly those of Village Boys. Yasoda, Kanhaya’s mother, could not bear such complaints and punished him by fastening his hands with rope, his feet with a cord, and by applying rod to hush his lips. The poem depicts a brilliant picture of Lord Krishna during his childhood.

“Ghanashyam” is the next poem in which the poetess sings the glory of Lord Krishna, who gives colours to mountains, laughter to snow-fed fountains, healing breath of balm to forest pines, beauty and blackness of his hair to the storm’s unbridled tresses, transcendent calm to seekers and sages. Her offer to Lord Krishna is:

O take my yearning soul for thine oblation,
Life of all myriad lives that dwell in thee,
Let me be lost, a lamp of adoration
In thine unfathomed waves of ecstasy. (13-16)

“Songs of Radha” is divided into three sub-titles – “At Dawn”, “At Dusk” and “The Quest”. In “At Dawn”, Radha tells her lover Krishna that she yearned for him throughout the night and wept for him, but in vain. At dawn, she throws away her bridal veils and garlands. Is it that he has fallen in love with some other beautiful woman? At last, she reveals her deep love for him, saying:

Without thy loveliness my life is dead,
Love, like a lamp with golden oils unfed.
Come back, come back from thy wild wandering,
Sweet Ghanashyam, my king ! (21-24)

“At Dusk” shows Radha preparing herself to receive Krishna Murari. She decorates herself with rich perfumes, saffron and sandal paste, shining garments, flowers of different varieties, a bestring of gems, fillets and fringes of pearls. She requests her friends to spread soft buds and ripe blossoms to cover Krishna’s coach and darken the doorways with flowering branches. Meanwhile, she hears Krishna’s turning how gloomy and fearful:

O like a leaf doth my shy heart shiver,

O like a wave do my faint limbs quiver.
Softly, softly, Jamuna river.
Sing thou our bridal song. (19-22)

“The Quest” shows Radha’s hectic search for Kanhaya right from dawn to dusk. When no information about him is received, she starts weeping and bemoaning. Just then, suddenly, she hears his hidden laughter intended to mock her. Krishna tells her that she is seeking him outside abortively, whereas he is always within her:

And askest wind or flowering dell
The secret that within thyself doth dwell?
I am of thee, as thou of me, a part,
Look for me in the mirror of thy heart. (17-20)

“Village Song” is composed in the form of a dialogue between a mother and her child. “In Praise of Henna” is about the gathering of the leaves of the Henna tree, used for colouring the lily-like fingers and feet of ladies. “Harvest Hymn” is in the form of a praise-giving song offered to different deities—*Surya* (the sun), *Varuna* (the Lord of the Rainbow), *Prithvi* (Earth), *Om* (Lord of Universe), and *Brahma* (the Lord of Creation).

Edmund Gosse has admitted, “She is the most brilliant, the most original, as well as the most correct of all the natives of Hindustan who have written in English”. (2) This graceful “Songbird”, who articulated the dream of a rising nation and combined Western culture with Eastern idealism, is truly the immortal “Nightingale of India”.

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