

## Sarojini Naidu's Poetry: An Evergreen Plant of Poetic Fragrance

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### Abstract

Sarojini Naidu, the nightingale of India, was a gifted artist whose poetry is pure and full of intense aspiration. Her poems bloom with fragrance of variety of themes like love of liberty, hatred of tyranny and regeneration of her own country. Moreover, mysticism in her poems is the result of her quest of peace in her life. Although her poetry is full of the note of suffering and melancholy yet there are also traits of optimism in her poems. In pre-independence Indian English poetry, she is regarded as an ardent, versatile and dynamic genius who is unsurpassable for her sweet and melodious songs. The present paper throws light on these different aspects of her poetry and brings forth the sweet fragrance in her poem.

**Keywords:** *Lyricism, Indianness, mysticism, humanism.*

### Introduction

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. Naidu is one of the illustrious poetesses of Indo-Anglian poetry. She possessed sharp aesthetic sensibility and was an admirer of the varied colours of Indian traditions and folk life. Her poetry is pure and full of intense aspiration blooming with fragrance of variety of themes like love of liberty, hatred of tyranny and regeneration of her own country. The present paper throws light on different aspects of Naidu as a poet and focuses on the poems written by Sarojini Naidu which depict lives of humble folks of India and their tradition. In pre-independence Indian English poetry, she is regarded as an ardent, versatile and dynamic genius who is unsurpassable for her sweet and melodious songs. 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-Anglian poetry. Her songs are in great tradition of Indian devotional literature - the literature which successfully and beautifully illustrates and explores the Vedantic and Upanishadic philosophy of love, truth, peace, God, immortality of the Supreme soul, religious faith, self-realization etc. The themes and background of her poetry were purely Indian and she sang in full-throated ease of the festivals, occupations and life of her people as a true daughter of her motherland. Lyricism, her spontaneous overflow of emotions steeped in Indian ethos and culture, the vividness of imagery, her simplicity of expression, symbolism, mysticism, native, fervour, her passionate desire for beauty, music and melody, and above all, her thrilling and rhythmic language. H.M. Prasad rightly holds the view: "Sarojini Naidu writes instant poetry when images and metaphors come rolling ready on the hot plates of imagination. Her poetry is intensely emotional, at times passionate to the point of eroticism and always has a spring-like lyricism"<sup>[1]</sup>.

Moreover, Indianness is an interesting aspect of the poetry of Sarojini Naidu. The poems in her first collection of poems titled *The Golden Threshold* in 1905 were appreciated for their Indianness. The impetus of Edmund Gosse is immense from

this perspective. Naidu considers him to be her literary Godfather as he was the one who advised her to burn her poems, discard the spurious English Vein completely and henceforth use her verses to illumine the orient before a Western audience: "I implored her to consider that from a young Indian of extreme sensibility who had mastered not merely the language but prosody of the West, what we wished to receive was ..... some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of narrative passion, of intimations as stirred the soul of the East long before the west had started to dream it had a soul" (Bird of time 5). This prophetic advice was the biggest influence on Sarojini Naidu. Thus, Indianness which implies Indian not only in the choice of subjects and sentiments but also in setting, imagery and diction becomes the important aspect of the poetry of Naidu.

Sarojini Naidu gained fame as a poet. Her poems, full of soaring rhetoric and sentiment found numerous admirers. The second collection of Sarojini Naidu's poems *The Bird of Time*, was published in 1912 in London by William Heinemann, it had the introduction by Edmond Gosse. It comprises of forty-six lyrics. Gosse praised it highly and found the poems much more mature than those which Sarojini Naidu had shown to him several years earlier. The collection received great reviews. *The London Times* said: "Fine expression of her nature rich in emotion, to find an Indian atmosphere making fragrant English poems is a rare pleasure."<sup>[2]</sup>

Then 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*' seen to be made of tears and fire like the clouds of a July evening glowing with the muffled passion of sunset."<sup>[3]</sup> There are dozens of Sarojini Naidu's poems that can't exist outside the Indian scene. They breathe the air of India and can survive only in it. One such poem, comparatively less known, is 'In Praise of Henna' in which the Indian maidens are gathering the leaves of the henna tree with which they can paint their hands and feet red:

A Kokila called from a henna-spray:  
 Lira! Liree! Lira !Liree !  
 Hasten maidens, hasten away  
 To gather the leaves of the henna-tree.  
 The tilka's red for the brow of a bride,  
 And betel-nut's red for lips that are sweet,  
 But for lily-like fingers and feet,  
 The red, the red of the henna-tree [4].

The poem embodies the union of nature with man in a custom, which is still prevalent and expresses with a rare delicacy and the fascination of Indian beauty.

Naidu has projected common Indian life with almost striking sensuousness. "Palanquin Bearer," is the much anthologized first poem in *The Golden Threshold*. This poem conjures up the rhythmic movement of the men carrying palanquins:

"Lightly, 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 dream..."[5]

The sadness of a departing bird and the joy of those escorting her to her new home the stages of the inexorable march of human life, expressed through a rocking rhythm and a cosmic imagery.

"She sways like a bird on the foam of a stream.....  
 She hangs like a star in the dew of our song;  
 She springs like a beam on the brow of the tide....."[6]

Then, another poem "Bangle sellers" is also a charming lyric depicting the vocation of bangle sellers. Bangles are the symbol of happy maidens and married women which is expressed in the opening lines of the poem by Naidu thus:

"Bangle sellers are we who bear  
 Our shining loads to the temple fair.....  
 Who will by these delicate, bright  
 Rainbow-tinted circles of light?  
 Lustrous tokens of radiant lives.  
 For happy daughters and happy wives" [7]

Each of the four stanzas describes bangles of different hues that will match the women wearing them; 'rainbow-tinted circles of light', for happy daughters and wives; 'silver and blue as the mountain mist' for a maiden; 'sunlit corn' and 'the flame of her marriage fire' for the bride; 'purple and gold-flecked gray' for the woman who has 'journeyed through life midway.' In her poetry one finds Indian weavers weaving in varying colours robe of a new born child, the marriage veils of a queen and a dead man's funeral shroud; the snake charmer who woos with his magic flute call 'the silver-breasted moon beam of desire', the corn grinders singing a pathetic song; Indian dancers dancing 'eyes ravished with rapture, ceaselessly panting', the gypsy girl in 'tattered robes' etc. Moreover, various Indian festivals like Raksha Bandhan, Diwali, Vasantpanchami and Nagapanchami find a place in her poetry.

Further, "Village song" is a mythical, mystical and symbolic poem by Sarojini Naidu. It deals the natural fear of a village maiden that has gone to fetch a jar of water from the river, Yamuna, The road is long and lonely and the night is going to

devour the day very soon. After having filled up her pitchers, she is in a hurry to return her home. But she is detained by the song of the boatman. She is so much fascinated by the song that she forgets to return and stays to listen to the song and so she gets late. One the other hand, the shadows of night are falling:

"Full are my pitchers and far to carry  
 Lone is the way and long  
 Why, O why was I tempted to tarry  
 Lured by the boatman's song?  
 Swiftly the shadows of night are falling  
 Hear, O hear, is the white crane calling  
 Is it the wild old cry?" [8]

In this poem, the poetess gives the hint of getting the salvation of the soul from the bondage of body. She says that the man who leads a life of austerity and renunciation follows the footsteps of God and thus, succeeds in attaching the supreme bliss. The village girl in this poem is surrounded by the fear of darkness, storm, rain and serpent. But in the long run, she finds a solution to devote her full faith in the existence of God so that he may succour her footstep and guide her.

Naidu presents Indian mysticism in "In Salutation to Eternal Peace", "The Soul's Prayer" and "To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus" reveals the poets experience of Buddha himself when she asks about how to attain 'diviner summits' or conquer or control "The Heavenward hunger of our soul."

The end, elusive and afar,  
 Still lures us with its beckoning flights  
 And all our mortal moments are  
 A session of the infinite  
 How shall we reach the great, unknown  
 Nirvana of the lotus- throne?

Then there are poems which express the patriotic note such as "The Lotus", "Gokhale", "Lokmanya Tilak", "Imperial Delhi", "To India" and The Gift of India". In "The Lotus", the divine flower becomes a metaphor for the spiritual personality of Mahatma Gandhi. She had always been drawn to the nationalistic cause. It is through Mahatma Gandhi and Gopal Krishan Gokhale that she was initiated in to Indian National Congress. As a patriot, she is a staunch supporter of secularism:

"One heart are we to lone thee, o our mother,  
 One undivided, unadvisable soul,  
 Bound by one hope, one purpose, one devotion  
 Towards a great, divinely destined goal."

Naidu's joy in Nature is revealed in "The songs of spring Time". The colourful Indian scenes with its Gulmohars and Sirsar, Champak and lotus buds and Koels evoke Indian flowers and birds and give her poetry an extraordinary Indian flavour. Her attitude to Nature is that of the English romanticist but her poetry is imbued with Indian colour and smell and sound:

"The earth is a fire like a humming bird's wings  
 And the sky like a king fisher's feather."

Thus, we see in her poetry the upholding of the highest ideals and values of religion and ethics which include essential unity of all faiths, humanism or belief in God. Moreover, the critical

exploration of some selected poems of Sarojini Naidu shows her Indian bent of mind, her diving deep in to the rich tradition of mysticism and her rhythmical dexterity. She was the nightingale of India who sang the eternal song of life and death, love and patriotism, compassion and beauty. K.R.S. Iyengar rightly observes:

“She was, above all, sensitive to beauty, the beauty of living things, the beauty of holiness, the beauty of the Buddha’s compassion, the beauty of Brindavan’s Lord. She didn’t specially seek out the bizarre, the exotic, the exceptional, but her poems lack neither variety nor the flavour of actuality..... she didn’t cudgel herself towards explosive modernity. But she had genuine poetic talent and she was a wholesome and authentic singer”<sup>[9]</sup>

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