

Romantic Depiction of Death in the Poetry of Sarojini Naidu

MEETA AJAY KHANNA
Department of English
Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya
Bilaspur (C.G.)
India

Abstract:

Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) was the pioneer poetess who is recognized for her remarkable contribution in the arena of Indian English poetry. She was one of the poets who belonged to the pre-independence era. She had mastered the language of the colonizers and used it brilliantly to write poetry goaded with sophisticated style and perfection. Thematic concerns of Sarojini Naidu's poetry are treated with the Romantic hue. One of the powerful themes in Naidu's poetry was Death. Naidu wrote remarkable lyrics on the theme of Death depicting Death as the Ultimate Truth. Naidu's poems on the theme of Death are powerful assertions. The proposed paper focuses on the poems of Sarojini Naidu written on the theme of Death.

Key words: Personification, Human entity, Eternity

Sarojini Naidu was one of the remarkable women poets whose poetry is appreciated for its powerful diction and thematic concerns. She wrote poetry on varied themes as nature, folk culture and traditions, patriotism, love and mysticism. One of the themes that recurs in her poetry is the theme of death. Sarojini Naidu's poems on death reflect her keen desire to know the inscrutability of death. Death is portrayed as the Ultimate Reality in the poems of Naidu. Coping with death, whether dealing with the possibility of one's own death or that of a loved one, remains one of the greatest challenges of our lives. When

dealing with the issue of death most people go through several stages: denial, depression, anger and finally acceptance. Spiritual masters and philosophers since long have said and written much on how to reach and remain in a state of acceptance.

Death is a prevalent theme in the poetry of many poets. Among women poets, Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson are known for writing poems on the theme of death. They both examined death from varied angles. There are many similarities as well as differences in the representation of Death in their poetry. The theme of death in two poems: “Two Views of a Cadaver Room” by Sylvia Plath and “The Chariot” by Emily Dickinson is been dealt differently by the poetesses. Plath viewed death as a sinister and intimidating end, while Dickinson depicted death with the endearment of romantic attraction. Plath’s poem depicts death traditionally, while Dickinson’s poem attributes mysticism to the end of life.

Sarojini Naidu also viewed death from different angles. Death is not a horrifying fact in Naidu’s poems as in Plath’s. In many of her poems she treated death in the manner Dickinson did. In some of her poems she regarded death as a reliever from pain and sorrows of the world; in some she lent a mystic touch to death which is a means to commune with the Infinite and in some she regarded death as a destroyer of mankind. Sarojini Naidu was not afraid of death for she believed that death leads to the communion of the soul with the Infinite. In her poem “In Salutation to the Eternal Peace” she wrote:

Say, shall I heed dull presages of doom,
Or dread the rumoured loneliness and gloom,
The mute and mythic terror of the tomb?
For my glad heart is drunk and drenched with thee,
O inmost wine of living ecstasy!
O intimate essence of eternity. (1958, 13-18)

In her poem “The Royal Tombs of Goloconda”, Sarojini Naidu expressed beautifully that Death cannot crush the glory and

beauty of human life. This poem was inspired by the royal tombs of the Goloconda Fort. The Fort tells of the glorious past of Goloconda and the tombs remind the visitors of the royal kings and queens who lived in the past and made the history. Though death has taken the beautiful queens into the tombs, their beauty revives even today when:

Each new-born year the bulbuls sing
Their songs of your renascent loves;
Your beauty wakens with the spring
To kindle these pomegranate groves. (1958, 20-23)

As Sarojini Naidu believed that Death cannot destroy the splendor of human life, in a similar manner Rabindranath Tagore projected his trust in “The Final Offering” that death cannot nullify poet’s contribution towards life:

Today, when the door of the playhouse opens
I shall make my final bow, and leave behind in the
temple of the earth my offerings of a life-time that
no death can touch. (2005, 19-22)

In “The Poet to Death” the poet did not fear death but appealed to her, “Tarry a while, O Death, I cannot die” (1958, 5). The poetess urged Death to wait for she still had to experience life: “With all my blossoming hopes unharvested, / My joys ungarnered, all my songs unsung, / And all my tears unshed.” (1958, 6-8). The poetess wanted to face life with its pleasure and grief before death took her away from this world. She wanted to be satisfied of all her human longings. Before she died, she wanted to experience love and anguish. In a firm voice she told Death to wait: “Till all my human hungers are fulfilled, / O Death, I cannot die” (1958, 11-12). The poem is in a monologue where the poetess is speaking to Death. Death has been personified and has been given a human entity.

The theme of death is a powerful presence in the poetry of Sarojini Naidu and it keeps reminding us of the poetry of Emily Dickinson on the mysteries of death. A common theme in

Emily Dickinson's poetry is the exploration of death, which becomes an often personified entity, being given a mysterious agency. This kinetic death sometimes seems to suggest a death wish on Dickinson's part, sometimes dread of the inevitable, sometimes uncertainty about what happens when we die, but in any case, it seems that she used the agency of death and of the dead to assert that death is not only a natural and necessary part of life, but that the dead can continue to affect the living by their spiritual presence. In some of the poems, Sarojini Naidu viewed death as a path to eternity as reflected in Emily Dickinson's poems on death. "The Chariot" written by Emily Dickinson expresses the poet's submission to Death and conveys distinct meaning to what is seen in "The Poet to Death", written by Sarojini Naidu. Emily Dickinson readily accepted Death. She considered Death as courteous in "The Chariot" and wrote:

We slowly drove, he knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labour, and my leisure too,
For his civility.
.....
Since then 'tis centuries; but each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses' heads
Were toward eternity. (1924, 5-8; 17-20)

As Dickinson accepted death willingly and considered it as a path towards eternity so Naidu, in few poems, awaited death with entreaty. She wrote in "Welcome": "Welcome, O tranquil Death! / Thou hast no ills to grieve me," (1958, 5-6). The poetess, thinking of her own death, personified death. She asserted that Death had no ills which would have made the poetess sad. Instead it would relieve the poetess of the sufferings. She stated that death is a comforter, "Who com'st with Freedom's breath / From sorrow to retrieve me" (1958, 7-8). In this poem Sarojini Naidu described death as a well-

wisher who liberates human beings from the worldly sorrows. She awaited death and showed no desire to experience life. In song 86 of *Gitanjali*, Rabindranath Tagore welcomed Death in the similar manner. The poet constructed an entity and called him the servant of Death. Depicting the servant of Death at his door he wrote:

The night is dark and my heart is fearful—Yet
I will take up the lamp, open my gates and bow to
him my welcome. It is thy messenger who stands at
my door. (1913, 4-7)

In the sonnet “Death and Life” written by Naidu, the poetess was being tempted by Death to be relieved from the pains and sufferings of life. The poetess stood firm and was courageous enough to face the challenges of life. She didn’t want to escape from her share of sorrow and pain which life had to give her and defied Death’s temptation:

Death stroked my hair and whispered tenderly;
Poor child, shall I redeem thee from thy pain,
Renew thy joy and issue thee again
Inclosed in some renascent ecstasy.... (1958, 1-4)

In the above poem Death is promising to renew the poetess’ joy. A similar positive attitude towards death is visible in the lines written by Sri Aurobindo in his poem “The Fear of Life and Death”. The poem conveys his belief that death is the means to acquire eternity. It relieves human-beings from the pains and sorrows of life and leads them to eternal life which is beyond death: “Death is but changing of our robes to wait / In wedding garments at the Eternal’s gate” (1942, 15-16). This philosophy is similar to the Christian belief which conveys that death leads to the communion with God. In yet another poem, “Atonement”, by Naidu the persona awaits death: “A wandering spirit grieves, / beating its pallid breast and making moan / O let my Death atone!” (1958, 10-12).

In some of her poems on the theme of death Sarojini

Naidu looked upon death as a destroyer while in some she viewed death as the reliever from pain. In “Love and Death” Naidu described death as a destroyer which separates the two lovers and ends the beautiful relationship they shared together: “O love, alas, that love could not assuage / The burden of the human heritage, / Or save thee from the swift decrees of Death” (1958, 12-14). In “At Twilight” she presented death, which she had often contemplated, as certain and near. Death is represented in such colours which, in her lonely musings, soothed her soul to peace. The versification is peculiarly melodious and sustains the solemn spirit which breathes throughout it. The poem ought rather to be considered didactic than narrative. It is the outpouring of her own emotions, embodied in the purest form she could conceive, painted in the ideal hues which her brilliant imagination inspired, and softened by the recent anticipation of communion with the Infinite through death:

Weary, I sought kind Death among the rills
That drink of purple twilight where the plain
Broods in the shadow of untroubled hills;
I cried, “High dreams and hope and love and vain,
Absolve my spirit of its poignant ills,
And cleanse me from the bondage of my pain!” (1958, 1-6)

Sarojini Naidu’s theme of Death is dealt in a Romantic manner. She regards death as a means to unite with the Creator. Personification and a variety of imagery are strong devices used by the poetess to lend grace to her poems reflecting the varied treatment associated with the theme of death. Sarojini Naidu is ranked amongst the gifted poets of Indian poetry in English whose poems convey seriousness and depth. Sarojini Naidu’s poetry has tremendous appeal as it is the sincere utterance of the lyrical poetess. Her contribution in the field of English poetry in Indo-Anglian literature is remarkable.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Dickinson, Emily. 1924. "The Chariot." In *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Boston: Little, Brown. Bartleby.com. 2000. 24 Sep 2004. <www.bartleby.com/113/>.
- Naidu, Sarojini. 1958. *The Sceptred Flute: Songs of India*. Allahabad: Kitabistan.
- Shri Aurobindo. 1942. "The Fear of Life and Death." In *Collected Poems and Plays*. Vol 1. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
- Tagore, Rabinranath. 2005. "The Final Offering." Trans. Somnath Moitra. *Poems of Rabindranath Tagore*. Ed. Humayun Kabir. Kolkata: UBS Publishers' Distributors Pvt. Ltd.
- _____. 1913. *Gitanjali*. London: Macmillan.