



The Poetry of Sarojini Naidu: A Canvas of Vibrant Pageantry of Folk Traditions

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Abstract:

Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) was the gifted artist, whose poetry is appreciated, for its bird like quality. 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. The Sceptred Flute: Songs of India was published in 1937, which is a collection of the previous three volumes of Naidu's poems. The Feather of the Dawn (1961) was published posthumously and contained poems written in 1927 by Naidu. 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, symbolism, imagery, mysticism and native fervour, are the remarkable qualities of her poetry. The present paper focuses on the poems written by Sarojini Naidu which depict lives of humble folks of India and their traditions.

Key words: Indianness, Indian folk tradition, Man-Nature relationship, aesthetic sensibility, imagery

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. 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. It

was Edmond Gosse who inspired Sarojini Naidu to infuse in her poems, the feature of Indianness. He was disappointed to see her early poetry, as they were imitations of English poets and on British objects. He felt that she has been ‘Anglicizing’ her feelings. Gosse advised her to infuse in her poetry, the hues of the Indian culture and traditions. Sarojini Naidu accepted his advice and the real poet in her came out in a glorious manner and her poetry thereafter, breathed an Indian air in all its freshness, glory and romanticism, with her themes exclusively Indian.

The poems in her first collection of poems titled *The Golden Threshold* in 1905 were appreciated for their Indianness. The volume bore an introduction from Arthur Symons. Its title was taken from the name of Sarojini Naidu’s home ‘The Golden Threshold’ and it marked Naidu’s entry into the golden world of poetry. It gave her recognition as a metrical poet both in the East and the West. The reviews it received were very enthusiastic and her poems were highly praised in the British Press. One of the important remarks in the *Review of Reviews* was: “This little volume should silence for ever the scoffer who declares that women cannot write poetry” (qtd. in Dwivedi 1981, 66).

Arthur Symons in his introduction to *The Golden Threshold* (TGT) referred to a letter written to him by Sarojini Naidu in which she said, “I sing just as the birds do, and my songs are as ephemeral” (1905, 10). For this confession of Naidu, Symons remarked: “It is for this bird like quality of songs, it seems to me that they are to be valued. They hint in a sort of delicately evasive way at rare temperament, the temperament of a woman of the east, finding expression through a western language” (1905, 10). He further wrote, “[...] the poems have eastern magic in them” (1905, 10).

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” (qtd. in Dwivedi 1981, 141). The *Yorkshire Observer* remarked: “Her songs are children of surprise. They break forth fresh and fragrant...each is a finished thing and a perfect delight” (qtd. in Dwivedi 1981, 141). The *Manchester Guardian* remarked, “Sarojini is more than the poet of the moment, of its splendour and transiency, its burden or its rapture. The heart of her country lives in her” (qtd. in Dwivedi 1981, 141).

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” (qtd. in Banerjee 1998, 97). *The Sceptred Flute: Songs of India* was published in 1937, which contained the previous three volumes of Naidu’s poems: *The Golden Threshold*, *The Bird of Time* and *The Broken Wing*. *The Feather of the Dawn* was published posthumously in 1961 and contained poems written in 1927 by Naidu. This collection of Sarojini Naidu’s poems was edited and collected by her daughter Padmaja Naidu.

Discussion:

There are greater poets than Sarojini Naidu but none more original because she saw things with a fresh approach. Much of it is beautiful without being difficult. She conveyed her private fancies beautifully and lent them universal touch. Her major themes were nature, love, life and death, folk life, patriotism and mysticism. One of the striking themes of Naidu’s poetry is folk life of India. Her poetry gained vitality and spontaneity through the folk inspiration. Her folk poetry reflected simplicity and contained vocabulary and imagery from everyday scenes and sights which showed her sense of solidarity with folk life as it is lived from day to day. Her poetry reflects her love for her nation and sings the joys and sorrows of her people. A. N. Dwivedi points out aptly:

A poet is a person of sharp sensibility and deep insight and is primarily guided and controlled by his inner urges. But he is also a social being, even if for a moment or two. As a social

being, he comes into contact with other persons, places and things and thus gains in experience. These other experiences supply food to his inner experiences. (*Sarojini Naidu and Her Poetry*. 1981, 51)

Sarojini Naidu was sensitive towards Indian folk traditions. Though she belonged to the aristocratic society, yet she was sympathetic towards the humble lives lead by the weaker section of people present in the Indian society. Affinity for humble folks is one of the important aspects of Sarojini Naidu's poems which are based on folk life. According to Rameshwar Gupta, her poetry "has the undertone of our daily sorrows and joys: it bears the echoes of a human heart" (in Grover and Arora 1993, 295). Sarojini Naidu had compassion towards the humble folks of her motherland. She projected their toil in day to day life. She sang of their sorrows and joys, hopes and aspirations. Gokak says, "She has almost a psychic sympathy with the great cavalcade of India's wandering singers and dancers and other humbler folks" (in Grover and Arora 1993, 410).

Sarojini Naidu's poems on folk life of India have a variety of aspects. Some 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. As Tagore, Sarojini Naidu was also a great lover of humanity and throughout her life she strived to serve the humble and the oppressed. She had observed minutely the lives of the humble folks of her country and appreciated in her poetry their participation in humble activities of day to day life. Sarojini Naidu painted beautiful picture of various occupations that were prevalent during her time and which are even now an important aspect of Indian life such 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. In the poem human emotions are set against the world of Nature. The first stanza of the poem depicts the solidarity between the fishermen. It is one of the important aspects of folk life in India. The poem begins with an optimistic note:

Rise, brothers, rise; the wakening skies pray to the morning light,
The wind lies asleep in the arms of the dawn like a child that has cried all night.
Come, let us gather our nets from the shore and set our catamarans free,
To capture the leaping wealth of the tide, for we are the kings of the sea! (1958, 1-4)

Man-Nature relationship is beautifully depicted in this poem. We find a deep relationship between man and Nature. Nature stands as a symbol of beauty that brings optimistic view of life, that consoles and brings forth a special meaning and message in man's life:

No longer delay, let us hasten away in the track of the sea gull's call,
The sea is our mother, the cloud is our brother, the waves are our comrades all.
What though we toss at the fall of the sun where the hand of the sea-god drives?
He who holds the storm by the hair, will hide in his breast our lives. (1958, 5-8)

Naidu's poem "Palanquin Bearers" in *The Golden Threshold* is one of the poems which has a unique title and depicts the tradition of carrying a bride in a palanquin. 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" (*Sarojini Naidu and Her Poetry* 1981, 122). They 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)

"Palanquin Bearers" is one of the beautifully written lyrics portraying the beauty of the bride and the rhythmic movement of the palanquin bearers who are delighted to carry the bride to her new home. The poem is rich in imagery and

beautiful similes. The 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 buy these delicate, bright
Rainbow-tinted circles of light?
Lustrous tokens of radiant lives,
For happy daughters and happy wives. (1958, 1-6)

“Wandering Singers” is one of the poems written by Sarojini Naidu that portrays the carefree life of the meek and contented wandering singers, who have no interest in the material world, who do not enjoy any comfort, who do not have homes to live but they sing -“All men are our kindred, the world is our home” (1958, 4). The line reflects Sarojini Naidu’s faith in universal brotherhood. The wandering singers are in harmony with everyone around them. They do not have close relationship with any particular person. They believe in universal brotherhood and therefore they are far above the frustrations and sorrows experienced in human relationships. They accept life in totality and are ready to accept everything offered to them by fate. Describing the carefree attitude of wandering singers towards life, Sarojini Naidu has written this lyric beautifully in the voice of the wandering singers:

What hope shall we gather, what dreams shall we sow?
Where the wind calls our wandering footsteps we go.
No love bids us tarry, no joy bids us wait:
The voice of the wind is the voice of our fate. (1958, 9-12)

According to B. S. Mathur, “Wandering Singers” depicts Sarojini Naidu as a poet, who was “filled with unlimited patriotism that is synonymous with internationalism” (1977, 66). “Wandering Beggars” in *The Broken Wing* is also one of her poems which beautifully depict the positive character of the wandering beggars. They wander from dawn till night homeless but they are in harmony with life. They are aware of the fact that, “Time is like a wind that blows” (1958, 13) and the future is a mystery for all, therefore they have a carefree attitude towards life and say: “So we go a fearless band, / The staff of

freedom in our hand / Wandering from land to land,” (1958, 17-19). The wandering beggars do not care for the materialistic world around them for they know that the ultimate reality for the rich or the poor is death. Naidu subtly expressed this reality in the last stanza of this poem where the night symbolizes death: “Till we meet the Night that brings / Both to beggars and to Kings / The end of all their journeyings,” (1958, 21-23).

“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. They have limited resources but they labour a lot to earn their living. Sarojini Naidu portrayed the life of street vendors beautifully. In stanza 1 the street hawkers are depicted roaming in the streets at the dawn:

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)

In the bright noon, when the sun shines bright and emits ‘the cruel heat’ the street vendors come out to sell their fruits and shout in a loud voice: “Buy fruits, buy fruits, rings down the eager street” (1958, 12). At night, “When twilight twinkling o'er the gay bazaars, / Unfurls a sudden canopy of stars, / When lutes are strung and fragrant torches lit” (1958, 13-15), the cries are heard aloud: “Buy flowers, buy flowers, floats down the singing street” (1958, 18). Naidu painted a vivid picture of three different hours of the day. She employed the device of triplicity once again in this poem and conveyed the importance of the service rendered by the street hawkers according to human needs and moods. Naidu depicted well, humble folks engaged in their daily task. The poetess portrayed the dignity of labour associated with the people of India through which they earn their livelihood. The vendors “are not merely picturesque or decorative characters, they are endowed

with life and vitality and are suitable representatives of the greatness of the land of which they arise” (Kaur 2003, 137).

“In the Bazaars of Hyderabad” is a descriptive lyric in which Sarojini Naidu portrayed the traditional and colourful pageantry of Indian bazaar which is evident even today in India. The vocation of merchants, vendors, goldsmiths, humble fruit-men and flower-girls are described in this poem beautifully who are engaged in their occupation to earn a living. The merchants are selling “Turbans of crimson and silver, / Tunics of purple brocade,” (1958, 3-4). The colours and texture of cloth convey their association with the royal families of India. Naidu further described merchants selling: “Mirror with panels of amber, / Daggers with handles of jade” (1958, 5-6), which once again paints a picture of luxury and chivalry. These lines convey the colour values prominent in the poems of Naidu due to the influence of the Romantics. Sarojini Naidu’s poems were unique and the striking feature of the poems was the Indianness in them.

Naidu’s poems that deal with the folk traditions of India, describe various shades of the lives of common folks of India. The folk songs reflect “the vistas of variegated and bizarre life in India and enchant us by their lilting, rhythmic music” (Raizada 1989, 100). Sarojini Naidu depicted the occasional celebrations of the humble folks in many of her poems. “Harvest Hymn” is one such poem where voices are heard rejoicing the fruits of harvest by the village folks and offerings made to God for the blessings bestowed upon them:

Lord of the Universe, Lord of our being,
Father eternal, ineffable Om!
Thou art the Seed and the Scythe of our harvests,
Thou art our Hands and our Heart and our Home.
We bring thee our lives and our labours for tribute,
Grant us thy succour, thy counsel, thy care.
O Life of all life and all blessing, we hail thee,
We praise thee, O Bramha, with cymbal and prayer (1958,
25-32)

Another poem of worship and exaltation, reflecting the hue of Indian folk tradition is “Hymn to Indra, Lord of Rain”. The poet has portrayed the prayers offered to Lord Indra who is the Lord of Rain according to the Indian Mythology. The poem

captures the folk tradition of veneration in the voices of men and women:

O Thou, who rousest the voice of the thunder,
And biddest the storms to awake from their sleep,
Who breakest the strength of the mountains asunder,
And cleavest the manifold pride of the deep!
Thou, who with bountiful torrent and river
Dost nourish the heart of the forest and plain,
Withhold not Thy gifts O Omnipotent Giver!
Hearken, O Lord of Rain! (1958, 1-8)

Sarojini Naidu's lyrics on the various vocations of Indian people echo the melody and rhythm of rich folk traditions and customs. "Palanquin Bearers", "Coromandel Fishers", "Bangle Sellers" are some of the fine examples of Naidu's melodic compositions. Chavan remarks aptly: "The folk songs evoke a characteristically passionate response from the lyrical sensibility of the poet. In them, the poet tends to elaborate recurrent rhythmic patterns with the help of repetitive images and musical sounds" (1984, 25). Sarojini Naidu's poems are well crafted by various devices and are appreciated for their lyrical quality. Her poetry reflects her passion for music and life. Naidu's poetic world glows with fascinating colours and creates a delicate pattern of joy and beauty. She portrayed the familiar world of Man and Nature. She was extremely sensitive to the joys and sorrows of her people and depicted them beautifully in her poetry. Her poems have beauty and charm of their own and reflect her art of writing poems having the stamp of originality.

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