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Sarojini Naidu: A legendary poetess

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Abstract

Also being a politician, Sarojini Naidu was an activist, freedom lover and a great poetess. She is also known as the "Nightingale of India". She was the first woman Governor of an Indian state after freedom. Her poems earned her an everlasting literary place in Indian English poetry. Her first published book was a collection of poems, named as "Golden Threshold". Next, she also published two other collections called "The Bird of Time", and "The Broken Wings", both of them attracted readers across the globe. She got her motivation from nature as well as the traditional values of India.

Keywords: Nightingale of India, freedom struggle, Indian poetry, traditional values.

Introduction

Sarojini Naidu was always interested in poetry from her childhood days. It may be due to the fact that her mother was a Bengali poetess and her father, Dr. Chattopathyaya encouraged and supported her to write poems. This aided her, to proceed in her own way into poetry without any hindrances. Sarojini Naidu was the first great Indo-Anglican poet who attracted worldwide attention. Born in 1879, two years after the death of Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu was brought up in the liberal intellectual milieu of her father Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya's house in Hyderabad. She imbibed that aerial passion for poetry and art, that cosmopolitan outlook and sense of humour from the Hindu-Muslim cultural traditions for which Hyderabad was famous. She stood first among the candidates who appeared for the matriculation examination from the Madras Presidency. At the age of sixteen she was sent to England for higher studies. When Sarojini Naidu was in England, she began to write poetry. In her early poems we can see the combination of fantasy and delight, a Keats sensuousness and resonance. She was advised to stir the soul of the East by confining to Indian themes instead of writing about English landscapes and flowers, skylarks and nightingales. The poems written after her return from England are all about Indian themes.

Sarojini Naidu's poetry is intensely Indian. The four volumes, The Golden Threshold (1905), The Bird of Time (1912), The Broken Wing (1917) and The Feather of Dawn (1961), of her poems give a pure picture of Indian scenes, sights and experiences transformed into a fantastic vision of colour, resonance and rhythm. In her early poetry Sarojini Naidu's focus is on intellectual life; the centre of her inward being. Though Sarojini is not a mystic poet, there are hints of her concern, with man's variable relationship with the universe in the volumes. The other-worldliness of the poems is not a continued experience, her dreams get determined too soon to allow our spirit's flight into the Incomprehensible. There is a fatal dichotomy in Sarojini's poetry that averts her from becoming a mystic.

An unpremeditated study of her poems proves about her large accumulation of words and their penetrating application. It is no doubt that she later grew to be one of the best orators in English in this country. All her poems taken together into demonstration a carefully budding poetic personality. We witness, the stable growth of her poetic responsiveness and imagination which at first found delight in witnessing a 'magical wood' or a 'wandering firefly' towards a tranquil but pleasant mood of mysticism as in To a Buddha Placed on a Lotus and The Soul's Prayer.

Sarojini's poetry gives a kaleidoscope of Indian scenes, pictures, sounds and experiences transfigured into an imaginary vision of colour and rhythm.

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Her topics are mostly familiar and even insignificant but for the fact that they are portrayed through the magic glass of her fancy. In her poetry there are Indian dancers and wandering signers, weavers and fishermen, palanquin bearers and bangle traders, milkmaids and boatmen, to state only a few. Some poems are addressed to well-known personalities ranging from Mahatma Gandhi and Gokhale to Mohammed Ali Jinnah and the Nizam of Hyderabad. The extraordinary dimension which she was able to give words soared, in later years, from poetry to such eloquence that audiences were wedged, swept away, and so mystified that they often ended up with knowing what it was that she had actually said. Her volume *The Golden Threshold* was published in 1905 and turned out to be a best-seller in England, receiving reviews of great commendation from all the leading journals and literary critics. In the introduction of her collected poems published many years later under the title *The Sceptres Flute*, she is conceded to be the greatest loving poet of India, also a passionate philosopher. She is the lyric poet, the singer of songs. She never writes for the mere sake of writing. There is no artifice in her poetry. She sings from the heart. In some ways it is blessed that her poetry was published before the birth of modern poetry, with its unembellished emphasis on truth without philosophy and gist without lyricism. Her period was that of the sonnet with its restraints of form, the ode with its demand to higher thought and the small gem of verse with its stress upon imagery and colour. It has been said she penned at a time when English poetry had touched the rock-bottom of romanticism and technical poverty and it is sure that her gem-like use of words would at a time like that have moved many chords, particularly in England, not only because they had basic excellence but as they came from a young woman who belonged to a very old country. According to her, modern poetry had no future and the trend would certainly return to the disciplines and beauty of the musical form of lyrics. Such a statement did not infer that she had greater foresightedness about the future of poetry than others, but that she honestly believed modern tolerance and lack of form to be a passing fad. What is more, like many people of her generation who find modern art hideous simply because it is not visually beautiful, she too feel that modern poetry honestly lacked her concepts of beauty. The ephemerality of her poetry appears striking to a reader well versed in the poetry of the West.

Sarojini was the last of the romantics in Indo-Anglican poetry and she was unaffected by the modernist revolution in the West produced by Ezra Pound, Yeats and Eliot. So, her poetry may appear obsolete but it has an essential value and historical importance. By getting recognition in England, she brought stature to Indian English writing long before Tagore got the Nobel Prize and her best poetry is not just a drained echo of the frail voice of decade not romanticism, but a true Indian English lyric utterance divinely tuned to the composite Indian ethos, bringing home to the impartial reader all the lavishness, pageantry and allure of traditional Indian life and the splendours of the Indian scene. In general, the poems of Sarojini Naidu could be categorised into five categories though she herself never did so. At least one-third of Sarojini's poems talks about love and its numerous manifestations, next some are those dealing with nature and then those narrating the problems of life and death. The fourth segment consists of songs on folk themes and Indian back ground and finally there are patriotic poems

addressed to national leaders. Though, in *The Bird of Time*, she hints at the multi-coloured panorama of her themes.

Sarojini Naidu was known as the nightingale of India, more familiar and melodious, tiny but powerful. 'Nightingale of India' or *Bhartiya Kokila* was bestowed on her because of her lyrical poems, which are rich in imagery and have a simple but timeless beauty appreciated by poetry lovers and studied by school students across the country.

Sarojini was obviously and unrepentantly romantic in her outlook – her sense of colour, her wide-

Eyed marvel at the world and her instinctive ecstasy. One who had a flair for the narrative and ambitions for the epic achievement.

Sarojini's work is English poetry in form and diction, and, as an art, focuses on all the laws and orders of that particular common device for the expression of individual souls.

Sarojini has given a series of thoughtful presentations of stages of Indian life that have come under her eye and moved her heart and not the least successful are those that try to do, no more than to catch the modest fancies or sentiments of familiar scenes. *Palanquin Bearers*, for example, lays on more significant basis to the comparison of a lady in a palanquin to a flower, a bird, a star, a ray of light, and a tear.

Lament so vividly expresses the sorrow, that a recent English critic mistook it, suggesting that the poetess was a widow. Indeed, in this later respect, that is, in her representation of the feminine side of Indian Life.

Sarojini's love-poetry is engrained in Indian folk-lore, myth and legend; the way in which the lover's admiration to the beloved is obtained from long-established forms of folk worship. In the festival rites of Holi, the folk lovers pester and force each other and thus seek out to achieve a association through love- play in the folk tradition of Krishna and the Gopi.

However, she is sensitive to human problems not in the national context alone, but in the context of the world as a whole. The hate, fear and suffering about which she speaks in her poems are the very evils that keep humanity divided and dissatisfied. She has a vision of humanity which was once noble and idealistic.

Sarojini is a poet with a cosmopolitan and secular outlook. Yet she is essentially Indian. There is hardly any aspect of Indian life that she has left untouched in her poetry. Her poems are a veritable picture gallery of Indian life in all its beauty and complexity. Her interest in national affairs began as early as in 1903 when she attended the Bombay session of the Indian National Congress and read out a short poem entitled "To India". Thus, her poetry began to reflect more and more the hopes and aspirations, despair and resolution of a nation that was struggling to free herself from the yoke of foreign rule.

It is curious to spot that while, in both her personal and public life, Sarojini has broken away from the ties of custom, by marrying other than her caste, and by emerging on public platforms, she reflects in her poetry the derived and dependent habit of womanhood that male domination has emotionalised into a virtue: in her life she is plain feminist, but in her poetry, she remains insuppressibly feminine: she sings, as far as Indian womanhood is concerned.

Thus, Sarojini Naidu glitters in all facets of literature than other poets in the Indian English history. It was only in the lyric period, however, from the time of her marriage in 1898 till her emergence into full-fledged national poet in 1915 that Sarojini Naidu was whole-heartedly wife, mother and poet – all in one.

The themes and background of her all major poems were purely Indian and she depicted the festivals, occupations and life of the Indians. Lyricism, symbolism, imagery and mysticism, are the remarkable qualities of her poetry.

Sarojini's Poems respire an Indian air in all its fresheners, splendour and romanticism. They are mellifluous and disclose a depth of feeling which is rare in the works of most of her contemporary writers of English verse. Her poetry is noticeable for her subtle imagination and melodious language and is noteworthy for its command of English. Her poetry tells us the various phase of Indian life. The genius of Mrs. Naidu is basically lyrical. Most of her poems are catastrophes of the heart of joy, sorrow, fervour and happiness. There is a power of feeling in many of her best pieces; combined with this, there is a magical rhythm in verses which are amazing.

There is also, an intense note of patriotism in her poetry. Apart from poetry, she also wrote articles and essays (to various newspapers and journals) on her political beliefs and social issues like women empowerment. Sarojini Naidu is considered to be one of the finest nature poets of India and a noteworthy freedom fighter.

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