

The Poetical Sketches of Sarojini Naidu

S. Nagendra and B. Sudha Sai

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Nightingale of India

Sarojini is an outstanding and distinguished poetess of India. She needs no introduction as her name is familiar to every reader of Indo-Anglian poetry. Popularly known as the 'Bharat-Kokila' or 'The Nightingale of India', she is the most lyrical woman poet. In her perfect lyricism and mellifluous melody, she is indeed the Nightingale of India in Indian imagination. She is one of Mother India's most gifted children, readily sharing her burden of pain, fiercely articulating her agonies and hopes, and gallantly striving to redeem the Mother and redeem the time.

Sarojini Naidu once described herself as "a wild free thing of the air like the birds with a song in her heart." This self-portrait reveals her essential poetic temperament and lyrical gifts. Spontaneity and naturalness of manner give her poetry a distinct bird-like quality and melodic beauty. She is a great music maker of superior poetic craftsmanship. Her poetry has great verbal beauty and glow of imagination. It abounds in sensuous similes and rich metaphors. Here is one from *Lieli*:

*A caste-mark on the azure brows of heaven
The golden moon burns, sacred, solemn bright.*

A Poet-Patriot

Sarojini's poetry reflects her involvement with Indian life. She is an epitome of Indian womanhood and commands respect from the younger generation as an intrepid freedom-fighter. She made outstanding achievement in the fields of poetry and politics. She may therefore be described as a poet-patriot with the accent on the former component. Being born at Hyderabad in a distinguished Bengali family, she is endowed with a long tradition of cultural heritage

Her Life in Hyderabad

Hyderabad was a prominent seat of medieval Muslim culture and Sarojini lived in the Islamic atmosphere of delicacy, oriental splendor and richness of Persian poetry. Hers was a royal and beautiful city whose glory she has recorded in two poems "Nightfall in the city of Hyderabad" and "In the Bazaars of Hyderabad". Islamic culture and Persian poetry greatly influenced her. Her poetry abounds in pictures of Muslim life and images borrowed from Persian poetry. Here is a typical picture of Muslim life.

*Hark from the minaret, how the muezzin's call
Floats like a battle-flag over the city wall....*

Apart from learning Urdu and being acquainted with Persian poetry, Sarojini learned English and Bengali. She matriculated from Madras University at the age of twelve. It seems that English romantics Keats and Shelley were her favorite though she also read Tennyson, Browning, Rossetti and Swinburne. These poets have influenced her art and sensibility. She imitated them in the beginning of her poetical career.

Romantic Indian Scenes

Some of the poems of Sarojini Naidu are romantic but they depict Indian scenes and sights. The folk songs are not rude they are full of lyricism, simplicity and rhythmic beauty. Of all these the most famous is 'The Indian Weavers', a poem of deep symbolic beauty. Other poems like 'Palanquin Bearers', 'The Snake Charmer' are equally remarkable for their romantic imagery and rhythmic lilt. She tried to catch and reproduce in English the lilt and atmosphere some of the folk songs in her early poems like 'The Bangle Sellers', 'Palanquin Bearers', 'Coromandel Fishers' and 'Snake Charmer'. Here is a poem typical of her romanticism, lyricism and verbal beauty and color.

*Weavers, weaving at break of day,
Why do you weave a garment so gay?...
Blue as the wing of a halcyon wild,
We weave the robes of a new-born child...*

There are love songs, elegies and dirges in Sarojini Naidu's poetry. Spring inspires her to sing but even as she thrills at the thought of 'The Festival of Spring', 'Vasant Panchami'. Her compassionate heart rues the plight of the Hindu widow who has no part in the festive ceremonials:

*Hai! What have I to do with nesting birds,
With lotus –honey, corn and ivory curds,
With plating blossom and pomegranate fruit,
Or rose- wreathed blossom and pomegranate fruit,
With lighted shrines and fragrant all tar fires,
Where happy women breathe their hearts; desires?
For my sad life is doomed to be alas
Ruined and sere like sorrow- trodden grass.
Akin to every lone and withered thing
That hath foregone the kisses of the spring.*

The Broken Wing

The third and the last volume of Sarojini's poems published in her lifetime is entitled 'The Broken Wing'. The memorial verses addressed to her father and to Gokhale are notably articulate 'In Salutation of her Father'

*O splendid dreamer in dreamless age
Whose deep alchemic vision reconciled
Time's changing message with the undefiled*

Calm wisdom of thy vedic heritage!

The title is symbolic and was taken from G.K Gokhale's question 'Why should a song bird like you have a broken?' which serves as an epigraph to her title poem containing two parts Question and Answer. The question is:

*Song-bird why dost thou bear a broken wing?
And here comes the answer:
Behold! I rise to meet the destined spring
And scale the stars upon my broken wing!*

Sarojini dedicated 'The Broken Wing' to the 'dream of today and the hope of tomorrow' Both the dream and the hope are about the future of India. The volume is permeated with the spirit of India, though some of the pieces convey her personal losses, disappointments and longings. One such poem is 'In Salutation to My Father's Spirit'. In 'The Broken Wing' as in 'The Bird of Time' Sarojini shows equal attraction for the Hindu and the Islamic traditions. The former is represented by poems like 'Lakshmi', the 'Lotus born', 'The Flute Player of Brindavan' and 'Kali the Mother', 'The Prayer of Islam', 'A Song from Shiraj', 'The Imam Bara', 'The Wandering Beggars' and 'Imperial Delhi'.

It is observed that this volume contains sixty-one poems but on actual count there are sixty-two poems. The volume is divided into four groups: 'Songs of Life and Death', 'The Flowering Year', 'The Peacock Lute' and 'The Temple'. The poems contained in these three volumes were later rearranged and put together in one big volume under the title 'The Sceptered Flute.' The rearrangement of poems is not chronological.

Freedom Fighter-Poet

It has already been stated that in 1920 Sarojini opted out of literature and took active participation in politics but she never ceased to be a poet. In 1928 she told Prof. Amarnath Jha of her intention of writing a book called 'Feathers of Dawn'. Mr. Jha said, "We heard no more of this collection and it is to be feared that the poems are lost." But, the poems were rescued and after Sarojini's death, her daughter Padmaja Naidu edited and collected them under the title 'The Feathers of the Dawn' published in 1961. The collection contains thirty-seven poems, five sonnets and thirty-two short lyrics. The collection includes such fine lyrics as 'A Persian Lute Song', 'The Gift', 'The Amulet', 'The Water Hyacinth', 'Raksha Bandhan' and 'The Festival of Sea'. It should now silence those critics who say that she abandoned poetry because her poetic powers had declined. It is opined that her poetic lyrical powers might be waning, but her poetry gained in maturity and seriousness.

Gandhi's Impact

With the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi on the political scene, Sarojini Naidu finds a new power to galvanize her to life. It is an age of heroic striving, an age of imperatives and absolutes. She looks into her bruised and broken heart and sees a new vision - the vision of chained Mother - and vows to break the bonds. She remarks, "My woman's intelligence cannot grapple with the transcendent details of politics." But love of the Mother is no abstruse science, and

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therefore for Sorojini Naidu politics is but a form of love and sedition but a form of poetry. The new lover expresses herself in inspiring oratory and fearless action. She presides over the Congress in 1925 and goes to prison cheerfully. She says “What though there be no pilot to our boat? Go, tell them we need him not. God is with us and we need no pilot.” Her assurance is all the grater when the nation finds in the Mahatma its destined pilot at last. She keeps faith with her leader till the very hour of his martyrdom. Her own death follows on third March 1949, and Nehru as Prime Minister then pays this fitting tribute to her in the Constituent Assembly:

*She began life as a poetess. In later years, when
the compulsion of events drew her into the
national struggle and she threw herself into it
with all the zest and fire, she possessed, she
did not write much poetry with pen and paper but
her whole life became a poem and a song ...*

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