

Indian Sensibility in Sarojini Naidu's Poetry

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Abstract : Like her brilliant predecessor Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu also springs from the very soul of India and is rooted firmly to her soil. Despite her literary affiliation with the English poets, her sensibility is purely Indian. For all her western garb, for all her adoption of English as her medium of poetic expression, she remains essentially the daughter of her race and land. Her themes, thoughts and even the imagery she employs in her poems are typically native in spirit and character. Her poetry paints the panorama of Indian life in all its colours and moods. The life of the Indian people fascinated and inspired Sarojini Naidu the most. She loves to be among them and share their hopes and despairs, joys and sorrows, ambitions and aspirations. To quote Meherally Yusuf in this regard

“She [Sarojini Naidu] presents in her poems veritable portrait gallery of Indian folk characters. The picture of Indian these evoke is romantic, but not anachronistic.”¹

The subject of her poetry is the simple, familiar and unpretentious world of nature feelings and emotions, simple joys and sorrows, vivid memories and reveries, poignant recognitions and epiphanies all characterized by the rich normality and poise of the Indian life and landscape. Sarojini Naidu was a poet of folk-consciousness. To quote P.E. Dustoor in this regard—

“The folk theme is the one theme in which Sarojini Naidu was the least imitative.”²

Sarojini Naidu presents veritable portrait gallery of Indian folk characters in her poetry. ‘The Palanquin bearers’ and ‘The Pardah-Nashim’ may be a memory of Rudyard Kipling’s India, but the weavers and the bangle-sellers and the fishermen and the beggars and even the snake-charmers are still authentic presences of the Indian scene. When we talk about the poem ‘Bangle-sellers’, it takes an imaginative leap from a folk-song to the level of a ‘sukta’ in which the entire life-cycle of an Indian woman from childhood to widowhood is enabled. Similarly, a short-poem like ‘The Indian Weavers’ establishes itself as a mystic threnody hymned to birth, life and death to ‘Sristi (creation)’, ‘Stiti (life)’ and ‘Laya (destruction)’. It, a powerful poem based on a common Indian scene, is symbolic in significance. Weavers can be seen anywhere in India weaving cloth on handlooms in different coloured patterns. Sarojini Naidu watches the weavers weaving their yarns and is led into the mystery of life, love and death. Once again to quote P.E. Dustoor in this regard—

“We are made to realize in the poem [Indian Weavers] that the web of our life is of a mingled yarn, grave and gay together.”³

The strongest feature of Sarojini’s poetry is her

vivid imagery. Her most memorable lines are those in which she has beautiful and graphic pictures by fusing together several visual impressions. It should be stressed that these images can be appreciated only by those who have retained their sensitivity to subtle stimuli which came from the Indian environment and those who still have a feeling for Indian aspect of life. To quote C.D. Narasimha in this regard—

“It [‘Indian Weavers’] is not merely a competent poem, but a very distinguished one for Sarojini Naidu, because the poet here is in full possession of rare gifts— a profound awareness of her own tradition, admirable poise, economy and an ear and eye for striking rhythm, image, and symbol, all used to fine advantage to make the poem most evocative.”⁴

The three stanzas of this poem [‘Indian Weavers’] describe a day in the life of an Indian weaver. The weavers enumerate the colour and texture and function of the garment woven by them. The weavers, at day break, weave a gay garment, blue as the wing of a halcyon will. They weave the robes of a new born—

**“Blue as the wing of a halcyon wild,
We weave the robes of a new-born child.”⁵**

At fall of night according to the poem ‘Indian Weavers’ the weavers weave a bright garment, like the plumes of a peacock purple and green, the colours of blood and sap, vitality and growth power and sustenance. To quote from the text—

**“Like the plumes of a peacock, purple and green,
We weave the marriage-veils of a queen.”⁶**

The glory, the mystery and the joy of life are all stressed as the magisterial impulsion of Vishnu in his creative mood. The third stanza suggests destruction and death. To quote—

**“White as a feather and white as a cloud,
We weave a dead man’s funeral shroud.”⁷**

In Greek mythology, fate appears in the form of the three sisters Cloatho, Lachesis and Atropos weaving the threads of birth, life & death of man. Sarojini Naidu reveals a capacity to invest the folk-theme with the richness of allegory and symbolism besides an adjustment of sensibility towards tradition. ‘The Palanquin-Bearers’ with its superb mastery of the metrical form, has the quality of a Rajput miniature painting. To quote P.E. Dustoar in this regard—

“It [‘The Palanquin Beares’] is a fair specimen of the truc folk-song.”8

It recalls a common experience in India a century ago and the Song of the Palanquin-Bearers expresses in its movement the muffled mumblings which dictated the rhythm of their march through the streets. The poetess has deftly caught the swift movement of the palanquin bearers and she has artificially harmonized the rhythm of this poem with their movements. Music, therefore is the cardinal quality of this poem. To quote from the text—

**“Lightly, O lightly, we bear her along,
 She sways like a flower in the wind of our song.”9**

The poem which is divided into two parts puts out the lacing of the two movements which define the total rhythm of human growth in the ebb and tide of life. The palanquin bearers, gorgeously attired, the veiled palanquin and young bride in the full bloom of her beauty. The bride sways like a flower in the wind of their song. She swims like a bird on the foam of a stream. She floats like a laugh from the lips of a dream. That is why the palanquin-bearers carry her along like a pearl on a string. There is a sense of connection of continuity and solidarity, in their action. To quote from the text—

**“Lightly, O, lightly we glide and we sing,
 We hear her along like a pearl on a string.”10**

The bride’s personality has passed a state and acquired a status from a passive role as a daughter, she has moved unto the active role as a wife. The image ‘falling like a tear from the eyes of a bride’ is beautiful and appealing. To quote Ramadhar Gupta in this regard—

“The image falling like a tear from the eyes of a bride in the poem ‘The Palanquin-Barrears’ is an achievement into itself.”11

Beggars are a common sight in India. One can find them anywhere in any part of the country. The poet might have seen, in her childhood, a large number of Muslim beggars with their begging bowls and tattered clothes in the Charminar area of Hyderabad. ‘The Wandering Beggars’ recalls a very common sight of India – that of Fakirs, moving from door to door singing psalms in a loud voice. Though they are deprived of all worldly comforts and joys, they wander with gay heart and divine courage, from morning to night. Since they are “free born sons of fate” they are not

envious of the wealth and glory of the great. Their sad plight evokes the poet’s sympathy and their lively portrait moves the same in the reader. To quote from the text—

**“We are free-born sons of fate,
 What care we for wealth or state.”12**

The beggars have neither shelter nor cloth, neither breed nor money, yet they always look ‘gay and bold’ unmindful of the present or the future, they fearlessly go with the ‘staff of freedom’ in their hand, from place to place. They go on wandering until they meet the night which is the same to the beggars and the kings. To quote from the text—

**“Meet the Night that brings
 Both to beggars and to kings.”13**

It is their deep faith that makes their life easy and carefree.

‘The Snake Charmer’ is a loving portrait of a familiar folk personality on the Indian scene. Sarojini Naidu shrouds everything that she writes with a halo of mystery and romance. The poem recalls a common native experience of the charmer inviting the snake on milk and honey. He tempts and flatters his pet in various ways which is portrayed in the lines given. To quote from the text—

**“I’ll feed thee, O beloved, on milk and wild red honey
 I’ll bear thee in a basket of rushes, green and white.”14**

The concluding stanza finds the snake charmer in deep love and professional attachment with his pet. The charmer identifies himself with his pet. The snake becomes a bride of his ‘Mellifluous Wooing’. He woos his bride with love which is reflected in the poem ‘The Snake Charmer’ in the given lines—

**“Come, thou subtle bride of my mellifluous wooing,
 Come, thou silver breasted moonbeam of desire.”15**

Sarojini Naidu’s folk songs are set to Indian tunes, and are meant for singing. They are remarkable in their oriental glamour, thought and eastern imagery. Amarnath Jha, in her tribute to Sarojini Naidu, says—

“She [Sarojini Naidu] is of India, the spirit of India is in her and although Men of all nationalities will find their questions echo and answered, yet it is the Indian that will feel his own feelings reciprocated in every line.”16

The poem ‘Village Song’ is set in the pastoral atmosphere of Indian countryside. The poet catches the folk spirit with admirable sincerity and portrays it in the following way—

**“There are no tender moonbeams to light me
 If in the darkness a serpent should bite me,
 Or if an evil spirit should smite me,
 Ram re Ram : I shall die.”17**

‘Wandering Singers’ is a beautiful lyric written to one of the runes of those nature minstrels who wander free and wide, singing the songs of life, love and joy. The

wandering singers, wandering through the forests and streets, and singing endlessly, give us a great message of universal brotherhood: 'All men are our kindred, the world is our home'. To quote from the text—

**"With hates in our hands ever-singing we roam,
All men are our kindred, the world is our home."**¹⁸

The wandering singers have no home, no direction, no destination, they move where the wind of time takes them to. They sing about the glories of day's bygone, about happy and simple though the singers are in gay and buoyant spirit, the song is pensive. The lines remind us of the following lines of William Wordsworth, 's 'The Solitary Reaper'—

**"Will no one tell me what she sings ?
That has been, and may be again."**¹⁹

The wandering singers are neither attached to the present nor looked into the future with hope and aspiration. There is nothing in the world that can bind them, neither the comfort nor stability of a home nor the excitement and ecstasy of love. The concluding stanza presents the philosophy of the 'Gypsy' tribe all over the world. To quote—

**"No love bids us tarry, no joy bids us wait.
The voice of the wind is the voice of our fate."**²⁰

The singers hear a call from the distant and eternal and move with the voice of the wind. The voice of the wind is in fact, the voice of the fate. Sarojini Naidu is miraculously successful in catching the spirit of the wandering tribe in her poem 'The Indian Gypsy'.

'The Indian Gypsy' is a 'daughter of a wandering race', and represents a class which has been roaming upon the earth since the times immemorial in the colourful pageant of diverse people which India proudly presents. The Indian gypsy girl leads a pastoral life, a life idealized by a number of former Greek, Roman and English poets. She and her sleep must go home. To quote—

**"Ere the quick night upon her flock descends
Like a black panther from the caves of sleep."**²¹

There is hardly any difference between Sarojini Naidu's 'Gypsy Girl' and all the gypsies scattered all over the globe, between the present day gypsy and the gypsy of centuries ago. We, therefore observe the very roots of humanity-primary emotions in a pristine state. Their emotions of love and hatred are, consequently fiercer and deeper in contrast with the superficial products of modern materialism. The gypsy girl appeals to the poet because—

**"She is twin born with primal mysteries,
And drinks of life at Time's forgotten source."**²²

'Corn-Grinders' is another genuine folk-song in which the villagers try to relieve the monotony and drudgery of their daily chores by songs and chants. Their subjective passion breaks in expressing itself in moods of melancholy,

reminiscence nostalgia and sheer whimsy. The 'Corn-Grinders' as is usual in many folk-songs, uses the animal motif, transferring human roles to animals and birds and vice-versa. The little mouse is crying, while merry stars laugh in the sky, because her Lord is dead, caught in a baited Snare. To quote from the text—

**"O, little mouse, why dost thou cry
While merry tars laugh in the sky."**²³

The implied social criticism is an element of folk-literature, speaking for itself without the editorial voice on surface stressing the socialist doctrine. To quote from the text—

**"Alas! Alas! My lord is dead!
Ah! Who will quiet my lament."**²⁴

Similarly, the little deer laments the death of her lover, who has met his end with the hunter's arrow, when at fall of even tide he went to drink beside the river-bed. The precarious and dangerous encounters which the simple needs of survival prompt living creatures into are described with the directness of the folk-idiom. To quote from the text—

**"Or still the want of famished years,
And crown with love my marriage-bed ?"**²⁵

In 'Bangle-Sellers' Sarojini Naidu discovers or presents the folk-custom of the 'Bangle wearing' ceremony, a poetic equivalent of a woman's growth from the status of a daughter to that of a wife and mother. The ceremonies have the markings of an auspicious initiation into adult life, auguring fulfilment, fertility and succession. When a woman becomes a widow, the bangles are broken symbolizing the tragedy of abruption and the experience that traumatically separates her from an active sense of role and status in family and society. The ceremony on that occasion assumes the form of a ritual withdrawal, denitiation and renunciation. The bangle is therefore a symbol of the Indian woman's connection with life and reality. To quote from the text when the poet cries watching a young widow, being stripped of her ornaments, including her dear bangles—

"Nay let her bet."²⁶

To sum up, as Sarojini's early poetry was western in feeling and imagery, E. Goose advises her to attempt to reveal "the heart of India." Sarojini took his advice very seriously and started to write in the true Indian spirit.

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