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SAROJINI NAIDU'S POETRY: A REFLECTION OF PATRIOTIC FERVOUR

DR. MEETA AJAY KHANNA*

*Former Asstt. Prof. (Adhoc),
Dept. of English,
Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur (C. G.)

Abstract

Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) is recognized internationally as a pioneer poetess of Indo-Anglian Literature. Her poetry throbs with patriotism, spirituality and mysticism. Sarojini Naidu emerged in the literary scene during the era of political awakening. She reflects her reverence towards her country and her people. She has written several poems goaded with her deep admiration for her motherland and for the prominent leaders who devoted their lives to the service of their country. The present paper aims to bring out the strong hue of patriotism which is one of the themes of her poetry.

Keywords: Colonialism, Geographical Entity, Pre-Independence Era, Patriotic Fervour, Despondency, Sublime image, Sovereignty, Resistance.

Introduction

Sarojini Naidu was a poet who belonged to the pre-independence era of Indian Literature in English. Patriotism is also one of the powerful themes in the poetry of Sarojini Naidu. She was a true patriot. All through her life she served her motherland and her people. Her poetry also throbs with patriotic fervour. Sarojini Naidu lived and created in those stirring times when India was passing through the pains of its struggle for freedom. It was an age of such great patriots and freedom fighters as Gandhi, Nehru, Gokhale, Tilak and many others. Sarojini Naidu had close association with such heroic personalities and could not remain unaffected by the spirit of patriotism. Her love for motherland is reflected in many of her poems.

Discussion

The theme of patriotism is dealt in numerous poems written by Sarojini Naidu. “To India”, “The Gift of India”, “The Lotus”, “An Anthem of Love” are the poems by Naidu which reflect her devotion to India. Joachim Alva observed rightly: “She is the wandering minstrel of India singing the joys and sorrows of her motherland from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin” (271). In “The Gift of India” mother India herself speaks of the gift she had to offer to the world-- the gift of her children’s lives. The reference is to India’s participation in the World War I:

Lo! I have flung to the East and West,
Priceless treasures torn from my breast,
And yielded the sons of my stricken womb
To the drumbeats of duty, the sabers doom. (*TSF* 3-6)

The poem “The Gift of India” describes fervently, India’s contribution in the World War I and reflects Naidu’s belief in universal brotherhood. Dastoor rightly comments: “In her outlook and temper, the old and the new, Hindu and Muslim, East and West, met and mingled without clash or incongruity. She was a patriot whose sympathies did not exclude people, and cultures other than her own. She was a citizen of the world who yielded to none in her attachment to Motherland” (1).

“An Anthem of Love” expresses poet’s deep love and divine duty towards her motherland. It is a moving expression of her readiness to undertake any amount of pain or do any degree of sacrifice. Naidu was an ardent freedom fighter. Her contribution during the turbulent time of India’s struggle for independence was commendable. Sarojini Naidu was transformed from a poet to patriot. Cousins remarked aptly: “She maintained no distinction

between her song and service” (*Renaissance* 176-77). “An Anthem of Love” has autobiographical element:

Two hands are we to serve thee, O our mother
 To strive and succour ,cherish and unite;
 To feel are we to cleave the waning darkness,
 And again the pathways of the dawning light. (*TSF* 1-4)

She was aware of her poetic gifts and wished to serve her country with her songs. She had deep love for her motherland and her people and was passionately concerned for their suffering. Prof. Iyenger rightly remarks on Naidu’s patriotism: “Like Tagore and Aurobindo, Sarojini too was more than a poet. She was one of Mother India’s most gifted children, readily sharing her burden of pain, fierce articulating her agonies and hopes, and gallantly strewing to redeem the Mother and redeem the time” (207). In the concluding stanza of “An Anthem of Love” Naidu expressed her faith in the unity among people of India, who together strived to free the country from the bondage of colonialism:

One heart are we to love thee, O our Mother,
 One undivided, indivisible soul,
 Bound by one hope, one purpose, one devotion
 Towards a great, divinely-destined goal. (*TSF* 9-12)

India, to Naidu was not a mere geographical entity but something “felt in the blood and experienced by the sense” (Narvane, *Sarojini Naidu* 74). The yearning for freedom always motivated her. She was a poet of national awakening. “To India” is a hymn to mother India in which the poetess urged her to rise and regenerate from her present gloom and despondency. The sublime image of a bride begetting new glories from the ageless womb of time renders the desired poetic effect: “Rise, Mother, rise regenerate from thy gloom, / And, like a bride high-mate with the spheres, / Beget new glories from thine ageless womb” (*TSF* 2-4). In the last stanza of “To India” the poetess reflected the faith she had for the promising future of her motherland:

Thy Future calls thee with a manifold sound
 To crescent honours, splendours, victories vast;
 Waken, O slumbering mother, and be crowned,
 Who once wert empress of the sovereign Past. (*TSF* 9-12)

“To India” is reminiscent of “To India–My Native Land” written by Henry Derozio: “My country! in thy day of glory past / A beauteous halo circled round thy brow, / And worshipped as a deity thou wast,” (1-3). Naidu’s patriotic fervour is also reflected in some of

her poems, which were inspired by national leaders like Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi and Umar Sobani. Gokhale, Tilak and Sabani are immortalized in the opening pages of *The Feather of the Dawn*. In *The Broken Wing*, “The Lotus” is a sonnet dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation. The poem highlights Mahatma’s virtues and spiritual heights attained during his lifetime. Mahatma Gandhi’s sublime character is being compared to lotus. Like a lotus, in true sense, Mahatma Gandhi withstood the strains of most adverse circumstances. Sarojini Naidu expressed her deep reverence and admiration for him. Naidu regarded Mahatma Gandhi as an epitome of purity and truth:

What legions loosed from many a far-off clime
Of wild bee hordes with lips insatiate,
And hungry winds with wings of hope or hate.
Have thronged and pressed round thy miraculous prime
To devastate thy loveliness, to drain
The midmost rapture of thy glorious heart. (TSF 5-10)

“In Gokhale’s Garden” is a memorable tribute to Gokhale. Gokhale inspired Naidu tremendously to dedicate herself to the service of her motherland. He was her political ‘guru’. She had great admiration for him. In a note at the end of her poem “Memorial Verses” she writes: “Gopal Krishna Gokhale, the great saint and soldier of our national righteousness. His life was a sacrament and his death was a sacrifice in the cause of India’s unity” (TSF 159). In her volume *The Feather of the Dawn* “In Gokhale’s Garden” is a fine poem in which the poetess described her admiration for Gokhale:

Steadfast, serene, dauntless, supremely wise,
In earth’s renascent bloom with prescient eyes
You sought hope’s symbol and you strove to teach
My heart with patient, high, prophetic speech
The parable of Beauty’s brave emprise. (1-5).

“Memorial Verses” is another poem in *The Broken Wing* which is a heartfelt tribute to Gokhale. He motivated the people of India to live in unity and to fight for freedom. On his death his funeral pyre, “Kindle their souls with consecrated fire / Caught from the brave torch fallen from thy hand, / To succour and to serve our suffering land,” (TSF 28-30). “Lokmanya Tilak” in *The Feather of the Dawn* is dedicated to Tilak. Tilak was a political extremist. He was cognizant of Maratha heritage. Naidu paid homage to the great patriot and freedom

fighter. Resistance for colonialism is very much evident in these poems of Naidu which throb with patriotic fervour.

Sarojini Naidu was completely free from provincial, linguistic, religious or cast prejudices. She was a Hindu who was very much at home in Muslim environment. Being a Brahmin she married a non-Brahmin. In one of her speeches she said:

I am born in Bengal, I belong to Madras Presidency. In a Mohammadan city, I was brought up and married and there I lived. Still I am neither a Bengali, nor a Madrasi, nor a Hyderabad, but I am an Indian, not a Hindu, not a Brahmin, but an Indian to whom my Mohammadan Brother is as dear and precious as my Hindu Brother. (Naidu, *Speeches* 9)

Sarojini Naidu reflected her faith in unity in diversity. She was a poetess of national consciousness and was a visionary. “Awake” is a powerful poem on patriotism. It was recited at the meeting of the Indian National Congress, at Bombay in 1915. Through this poem Naidu conveyed her deep faith in the joint efforts of all communities to acquire independence from British Raj. In this poem she personified India as a Divine Mother who showers her blessings upon all her children irrespective of their cast and creed and is been worshiped with deep passion by all her children. The concluding stanza is a chorus which depicts Hindus, Parsis, Muslims and Christians offering their prayers separately, and at the end people of all faith pray together: “Shall not our dauntless devotion avail thee? / Hearken! O queen and O goddess, We hail thee!” (*TSF* 17-18). Sarojini Naidu worked extensively for the unity among her people during the sensitive period of India’s struggle for sovereignty. She was a “poem personified into flesh and bone, a love lyric in human shape with the essence of humanity embodied in her. She is Maupassant’s ideal woman who has neither caste nor race” (Alva 270).

Praising the capital city of Delhi Sarojini Naidu wrote a sonnet entitled “Imperial Delhi”. Delhi has a capturing historical background which has been conveyed by the poetess artfully in this sonnet. The word ‘Imperial’ used in the title reflects the subjugation under which the glorious and ancient city of Delhi suffered. It depicts the dominance of power from overseas. The poetess asserted that along with the harsh experiences in the past, Delhi also had a golden history because it was nurtured as the capital city by many kings and kingdoms. Naidu wrote:

Thy changing kings and kingdoms pass away
 The gorgeous legends of a bygone day,
 But thou dost still immutably remain
 Unbroken symbol of proud histories,
 Unageing priestess of old mysteries
 Before whose shrine the spells of Death are vain. (TSF 9-14)

As she belonged to the era of political awakening, her poetry throbs with patriotic urge too. She lived in one of the most turbulent periods of the Indian history; she was a great patriot, and was greatly influenced by Gokhle and Mahatma Gandhi. “The Lotus” included in *The Sceptred Flute: Songs of India (TSF)* is a tribute by her to Mahatma Gandhi. She described the spiritual heights attained by Mahatma Gandhi which cannot be achieved by anyone else:

But who could win thy secret, who attain
 Thine ageless beauty born of Bramha’s breathe,
 Or pluck thine immortality, who art
 Coeval with the lords of life and death? (TSF 11-14).

Sarojini Naidu was a poet of national awakening. Her patriotic lyrics describe her yearning for freedom for her motherland and are tribute to the great national leaders of her time. “To India” from *The Golden Threshold* is a poem which reflects that, her ultimate aim in life was “to restore to India, her true position as supreme mistress in her own home...” (Alexander 390). She expressed in the poem “To India”:

The nation that in fettered darkness weep
 Crave thee to lead them where great mornings break....
 Mother O Mother, wherefore dost thou sleep,
 Arise and answer for thy children’ sake!...
 They Future calls the with a manifold sound
 To crescent honours, splendors, victories vast;
 Waken, O slumbering Mother, and be crowned
 Who once wert empress of the sovereign past. (TSF 5-12)

Here we gather the image of India as ‘Mother’. Meena Alexander remarks that in this poem, “India’s association with British colonisation provides a telling twist to the pervasive femaleness of the Indian earth” (Alexander 385). Colonial consciousness and resistance is quite evident in the poem “To India”.

Unity among Hindus and Muslims was also the need of time, and Sarojini Naidu exquisitely sang about the harmony among people of different religion. Her famous poem “The Call to Evening Prayer” in *The Bird of Time* is a marvelous expression in verse that reflects communal harmony and Naidu’s cosmopolitan approach, for “Sarojini could appeal to people of all religion, speak the language of all, so as to say, for she sprang from the people, who had never created the bogey, of a revealed religion in which they had to believe or go to perdition” (Chattopadhyay 437). The poetess wrote:

Allah ho Akbar! Allah ho Akbar!
 Mosque and minar the muezzins are calling;
 Pour forth your praises, O Chosen of Islam;
 Swiftly the shadows of sunset are falling:
 Allah ho Akbar! Allah ho Akbar! (TSF 1-5)

In stanza 1 Naidu described Muslim devotees praying in a mosque. The stanza captures the Muslim spirit beautifully. In stanza 2 the poetess described Christians offering their prayers to the Blessed Mother:

Ave Maria! Ave Maria!
 Devoutly the priests at the altars are singing,
 O ye who worship the Son of the Virgin,
 Kneel soft at your prayer for the vespers are ringing:
 Ave Maria! Ave Maria! (TSF 6-10)

Stanza 3 portrays Parsis singing praises of Ahura Mazda. Sarojini Naidu was sensitive towards people of all religion. In this lyric she described the Muslims, the Christians, the Parsis and the Hindus with equal respect:

Ahura Mazda! Ahura Mazda!
 How the sonorous Avesta is flowing!
 Ye, who to Flame and the Light make obeisance,
 Bend low where the quenchless blue touches are glowing:
 Ahura Mazda! Ahura Mazda! (TSF 11-15)

In the last stanza of “The Call to Evening Prayer” she depicted the Hindu devotees chanting the mantra of ‘Naray’yana! Naray’yana!’ which displays Naidu’s Hindu sensibility. The stanza conveys the adoration towards Brahma reflecting Hindu philosophy: “Hark to the ageless, divine invocation! / Lift up your hands, O ye children of Brahma, / Lift up your voices in rapt adoration: / Naray’yana! Naray’yana!” (TSF 17-20). “The Call to Evening Prayer” is a poem reflecting the spirit of unity among the people of India despite the diversity

of culture and religion. The motherland is worshiped with sincere devotion by all her children whether they are Christians, Parsis, Muslims or Hindus.

Conclusion

Sarojini Naidu's poems were unique and qualitative. The striking feature of her poetry is the hue of Indianness in them. A. N. Dwivedi rightly remarks, "One of modern India's illustrious daughters, Sarojini ably served the cause of Indo-Anglian poetry, at the dawn of the twentieth century" (14). Sarojini Naidu's poems were unique and qualitative. The striking feature of Naidu's poetry was a wide range of themes. Patriotic zeal is one of the powerful themes evident in her poetry. Sarojini Naidu's poetry provides several windows to the political concerns associated to the era of political awakening to which she belonged.

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