Indianness in the Poetry of Sarojini Naidu

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Abstract

Sarojini Naidu is a prominent figure in pre-independence Indian English poetry. She is considered to be a dreamer, born in a dreamless age and an ardent, versatile and dynamic genius unsurpassable for her sweet and melodious songs which are unsurpassed in the entire range of Indian English poetry as a magnificent and colourful album of Indian life.

Introduction

Indianness is an interesting aspect of the poetry of Sarojini Naidu. The impetus of Edmund Gosse is immense from this perspective. Naidu considers him to be her literary godfather. Naidu met her when she was in England from 1895 to 1898 as a student of English literature at Girton College, Cambridge. Naidu would have met the same fate as all the other minor poets and would have been permanently consigned to the sidelines had not a small bit of advice from Gosse came as a godsend. Coming to know of Naidu’s poetic aptitude he desired one day to see her verses. What he saw disappointed him thoroughly:

(The poems were) “skilful in form, correct in grammar and blameless in sentiment, but they had the disadvantage of being totally without individuality. They were Western in feeling and imagery; they were founded on reminiscences of Tennyson and Shelley”. (Bird of Time 4).

Gosse advised her to burn her poems, discard the spurious English vein completely and henceforth use her verses to illumine the Orient before a Western audience:

“I implored her to consider that from a young Indian of extreme sensibility who had mastered not merely the language but the prosody of the West, what we wished to receive was… … … some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of narrative passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East long before the West had started to dream it had a soul.” (Bird of Time 5)

This prophetic advice was the biggest influence on Sarojini Naidu. Thus Indianness which implies Indian not only in the choice of subjects and sentiments but also in setting, imagery and diction becomes an important, if not the most important aspect of the poetry of Naidu. For the sake of systematic discussion the topic can be analysed under several heads, namely poems on Indian mysticism, poems expressing the patriotic note, poems projecting various facets of Islam and Muslim life, poems poetizing the nature of India, poems using mythical and legendary figures of India and poems on common Indian life.
Poems on Indian Mysticism

Naidu presents Indian mysticism in *In Salutation to Eternal Peace, The Soul’s Prayer* and *To a Buddha Seated in a Lotus*. She has gone through gay and sad experiences in her life. So she longs to know the secret to life, death and love. In *The Soul’s Prayer* she requests God:

> “Give me to drink each joy and pain
> Which thy eternal hand can meet.
> For my insatiate soul would drain
> Earth’s utmost bitter, utmost sweet.”

As suggested already Naidu accepts the reality of Death but she is not afraid of it. To her life’s loveliness and joys are of greater importance. In *In Salutation to Eternal Peace* she poetizes her immense love for life:

> “Men say the world is full of fear and hate
> And all life’s ripening harvest fields await
> The restless sickle of relent less fate.
> But I, sweet soul, rejoice that I was born,
> When from the climbing terraces of corn
> I watch the golden circles of Thy morn.

In *To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus* the fever of regret and the fervor of longing fuse into strength and mystic power:

> “For us the travail and the heat,
> The broken secrets of our pride,
> The strenuous lessons of defeat,
> The flower deferred, the fruit denied;
> But not the peace supremely won,
> Lord Buddha, of thy Lotus- throne".
It is due to the emotional depth and intellectual vigour that the three poems mentioned above have been included in *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*.

**Poems Expressing the Patriotic Note**

Patriotic note is found in Naidu’s *The Lotus, Gokhale, Lokmanya Tilak, Imperial Delhi, To India* and *The Gift of India*. In *The Lotus* the divine flower becomes a metaphor for the spiritual personality of Mahatma Gandhi. About this sonnet A.K. Mehrotra says, “On Gandhi she composed a sonnet, *The Lotus*, using an improbable metaphor to describe the leader’s unique magnetism” (*A Concise History of Indian Literature in English* P150). She had always been drawn to the nationalistic cause. It is through Mahatma Gandhi and Gopal Krishna Gokhale that she was initiated into Indian National Congress. As a patriot she is a staunch supporter of secularism:

“One heart are we to love thee, O our mother,

One undivided, undivisible soul,

Bound by one hope, one purpose, one devotion

Towards a great, divinely destined goal.”

In her poem *The Call to Evening Prayer* the Muslims call from mosque “Allah ho Akbar! Allah ho Akbar!”, The Christians sing in churches “Ave Maria! Ave Maria!”, the Parsees make obedience to Flame and Light and sonorously sing “Ahura Mazda! Ahura Mazda!” and the devout Hindus lift up their voices in adoration chanting “Narayan! Narayan!” . What India needs today most is an atmosphere of religious tolerance and understanding which Sarojini Naidu has revealed through her poetry. About the patriotic note in her paetry K.R.S. Iyenger observes, “She struck the right ‘Patriotic’ note again and again. Love of one’s country was an emotion as much as the love of man or Nature and some of her poems-- for example her invocations to the national leaders and her lyrics *Awake*, *An Anthem of Love* and *To India*—are patriotic without the faintest trace of jingoism” (*Indian Writing in English*).

**Poems Projecting Various Facts of Islam and Muslim Life**

Various facets of Islam and Muslim life are fairly dealt with in *The Prayer of Islam, The Old Woman* and *The Imam Bara*. The poem *The Purdah Nashin*, occurring in *The Golden Threshold* poetizes the fact that life behind the purdah, as in vogue in the Muslim life, is not just secure; rather it is romantic too. However the only thing against which the veil cannot provide security is the onslaught of time. What the poetess actually attempts is to contrast this life of apparent ease and security to the harsh reality of life behind the veil. The system of purdah was originally designed by Muslims as a tool for women to maintain their modesty. But over the
years there “fragile curtain” turned out to be a heavy death shroud for women. It is this havoc worked on women that is expressed by Naidu in the unexpressed agony and anguish of the purdahnashin:-

“Time shifts the curtain unawares
And sorrow looks into her face
Who shall prevent the subtle years
Or shield a woman’s eyes from tears”. (The Golden Threshold 88)

Poems Poetizing the Nature of India

Naidu’s joy in Nature is revealed in The Songs of Spring Time. The colourful Indian scenes with its Gulmohars and Sirsas, Champak and Lotus buds and Koels evoke Indian flowers and birds and give her poetry an extraordinary Indian flavour. Her attitude to Nature is that of the English romanticists but her poetry is imbued with Indian colour and smell and sound:

“The earth is a fire like a humming-bird’s wings
And the sky like a king fisher’s feather”

Poems Using Mythical and Legendary Figures of India

About Naidu’s use of Indian mythical and legendary figures Mehrotra says, “Mythical heroines like Sita and Savitri, Damayanti and Draupadi; legendary figures like Padmini of Chittor and Princess Zebunnissa … … … … began populating her poetry”. (A Concise History of Indian Literature in English)

Poems on Common Indian Life

With almost striking sensuousness Naidu has projected common Indian life in her poems. The anapaestic lines from Palanquin Bearers, the much anthologized first poem in The Golden Threshold conjure up the rhythmic movement of the men carrying palanquins:

“Lightly, Lightly, we bear her along
She sways like a flower in the wind of our song;
She skims like a bird on the foam of a stream,
She floats like a laugh from the lips of a dream … …”

In another popular poem Bangle Sellers each of the four stanzas describes bangles of different hues that will match the women wearing them: ‘rainbow-tinted circles of light’ for happy daughters and wives; ‘silver and blue as the mountain mist’ for a maiden; ‘sunlit corn’ and ‘the
flame of her marriage fire’ for the bride; ‘purple and gold-flecked gray’ for the woman who has ‘journeyed through life midway’ In The Wandering Beggars and The Indian Gypsy common human beings have been portrayed with dignity and grace that characterise Wardsworth’s Michael and The Leechgatherer. In her poetry one finds Indian weavers weaving in varying colours robe of a new born child, the marriage veils of a queen and a dead man’s funeral shroud; the snake charmer who woos with has magic flute call ‘the silver-breasted moon beam of desire’, the corn grinders singing a pathetic song; Indian dancers dancing ‘eyes ravished with rapture, ceaselessly panting’, the gypsy girl in ‘tattered robes’ etc. Moreover various Indian festivals like Raksha Bandhan, Diwali, Vasantpanchami and Nagapanchami find a place in her poetry The Village Song, based on a village woman’s daily chore of fetching water from the Jamuna river, faithfully presents a vignette of life in the country side—a lonesome village girl carrying back home water- filled pitchers on her head, a lonely village path with dangers lurking around, especially at nightfall with darkness engulfing the neighbourhood. The magnitude of the difficulties and dangers is highlighted by the possibility of a storm breaking with menacing light, flashes with no safe shelter around. A similar humanistic meaning may be read into Coromandel Fishers written in the farm of a clarion call given by the brave heroes of the deep to their vessels on the sea. A collage of different moods of the Coromandel fishers makes the poem a unique blend of love for the beauty of the sea and love of labour Suttee occurring in The Golden Threshold condemns the disgusting Hindu custom of ‘Suttee’.

Conclusion

The India that Sarojini Naidu has presented in her poems is a land of beauty and merriment. The Yorkshire Post reviewer admires her poetry in the following manner:

“Mrs Naidu has not only enriched our language, but has enabled us to grow into intimate relation with the spirit, the emotions and glamour of the East.”

Works Cited:

The Bird of Time. Naidu, Sarojini.
The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse
A Concise History of Indian Literature in English. Mehrotra, A.K.
Indian Writing in English. Iyenger, K.R.S.