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Sarojini Naidu: A Bridge between Colonial and Independent India

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Abstract

Sarojini Naidu was born when India was a colony of British Empire and she died at the time when India became a free nation and while serving as the Governor of Uttar Pradesh. She actively participated in Indian Freedom Movement and she was also the first Indian woman to become the leader of Indian National Congress. She befriended with almost all renowned freedom-fighters of the time like Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawahar Lal Nehru and many more. No wonder, she inspired many Indian women to serve as freedom-fighters by her powerful and eloquent speeches. She is that interesting woman figure who has one leg in colonial time and another in post-colonial time, and somewhere down the line, she is the poet who served as a bridge between colonized and Independent India. Thus, this paper attempts to analyze to what extent Sarojini Naidu served as a bridge between colonial and Independent India and for the purpose her speeches, writings and poetry are taken into consideration.

Keywords: Colonization, Mimicry, Binary Opposition, Women Empowerment, Indian Freedom Movement, British Raj.

Introduction

Sarojini Naidu was born in the time when India was a colony of Britain and died two years after India got its Independence. When Sarojini Naidu was born i.e., in the year 1879, the Independence Movement of India has taken its speed. Twenty-two years prior to her birth, the great Indian Mutiny of 1857 has shaken the whole nation to realize their condition as colonial beings, and the plight which they have suffered in the British Raj charged them to get united to free their motherland from the shackles of the Britishers. It was the time when literacy-rate was very low in India and women's education was an issue of great debate. Sarojini Naidu, herself, in one of her lectures delivered at the Indian Social Conference, Calcutta, 1906 has raised the matter of women's education in India. Mrs. Naidu stated as follows,

It seems to be a paradox, at once touched with humor and tragedy, that on the very threshold of the twentieth century, it should still be necessary for us to stand upon public platforms and pass resolutions in favor of what is called female education in India, which, at the beginning of the first century was already ripe with civilization and had contributed to the world's progress radiant examples of women of the highest genius and widest culture. (17)

Sarojini Naidu was compelled to talk upon women's education in her lectures and speeches because she was living in an era where men generally raise their eyebrows on the fact that a woman is taking creative writing as the chief concern of her life, and being a woman, she is participating in the struggle movement

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for independence with some patriotic fervour. This was not only the mindset of Oriental people, but at that time even in the West, the mindset was more or less of the same kind. In response to one of the letters written to Charlotte Bronte, Robert Southey wrote, “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be” (Aitken 152). It was the time when India was undergoing the torments of the British rule, Sarojini Naidu who was a brilliant orator and who had the rare ability to motivate the thoughts of people by her powerful speeches, was trying her best to change the mindset of her native people. In that very lecture, Mrs. Naidu has profoundly explained to the public that why their native men are lagging behind when once they were the leader of the world. She indicated that the reason for their backwardness lies in the illiteracy of their women, and further in her speech she told the simple formula of true success:

That is why you men of India are to-day what you are: because your fathers, in depriving your mothers of that immemorial birthright, have robbed you, their sons, of your just inheritance. Therefore, I charge you, restore to your women their ancient rights, for, as I have said it is we, and, not you, who are the real nation-builders, and without our active co-operation at all points of progress all your Congresses and Conferences are in vain. Educate your women and the nation will take care of itself. (Narvane, 20).

Now the question arises that when Sarojini Naidu has to deliver a powerful lecture on women’s education then how come she got educated enough to speak so? Answer to this question lies in the parentage and up-bringing of Sarojini Naidu. She was the eldest child of Barada Sundari Devi, a noted Bengalee poet, and Aghorenath Chattopadhyay, a scientist and philosopher and the founder of the Nizam’s College of Hyderabad. Sarojini with her siblings led a carefree and happy life which ‘not unduly sheltered but thoughtfully regulated by her parents’, (Sarojini Naidu by V. S. Naravane) and this ultimately helped their talents to flourish in a better manner. So, it was the background and the atmosphere along with the culture and refinement which imposed its impact on the minds of Sarojini and her siblings. The house of Sarojini Naidu was a place where almost all renowned person of that time used to come to visit her father; hence she got exposed to the great minds of her time from her very childhood. It is also a fact that “the house was a cross between a museum and a zoo’, full of pet animals, curious, bric-a-brac, and a medley of strange people: ‘astronomers, scholars, mystics, beggars and princes” (Narvane 15). Sarojini Naidu and all her siblings were multilingual. Her eldest brother was fluent in sixteen languages. She has mastered three languages; Urdu, Telugu, and English, though she was quite reluctant in mastering over the English language. In her house speaking in English was a compulsory thing to do. She was once locked in a room for a whole day so that she must not dare to speak in any language but English. “[...] as a child she resisted English for a long time. Her father once punished her for this stubbornness. He locked her up in a room and refused to let her out until she had composed a stanza in English” (Narvane 16). Thus, the English language became very handy to her, almost like her first language which further helped her in composing poems in English with ease. Such was the strict atmosphere of her house which from her very childhood forced her to mimic like colonizers. The impact of the colonization was in the air in the house of Aghorenath Chattopadhyay which layered little Sarojini’s mind with the fancy and grandeur of British culture.

Not only her upbringing but also her mind was designed in an order to grasp things faster. At the tender age of twelve, she not only passed the matriculation examination in First Class from Madras but also she has topped the entire presidency. Then, at the age of fifteen, she went to study at Cambridge University in the year 1895 on a scholarship from the Nizam of Hyderabad. The impact of English education and western culture upon her mind was so immense that it ultimately leads her to the composition of poems in

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English. Rural background and English countryside has appealed to her nerves greatly and there she composed her earlier poems upon them. Sarojini Naidu was deeply influenced by British culture because of her education and background, and the outcome of it was her imitation in poetic writings like that of British Romantic poets.

In the “Introduction” written for the second poetic collection of Sarojini Naidu, i.e., *The Bird of Time*, Edmund Gosse stated that though he has not found any grammatical mistakes in her earlier writings and the way of presentation was also fine still he got disappointed to see them as they were mere imitations of English poets and the whole collection of poems was only projected on British objects. After reading her English poems he understood that Sarojini Naidu was ‘Anglicizing’ her feelings which in turn has become artificial and therefore, was unable to appeal to his nerves. Edmund Gosse wrote:

[...] The verses which Sarojini had entrusted to me 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 in imagery; they were founded on reminiscences of Tennyson and Shelley; I am not sure that they did not even breathe an atmosphere of Christian resignation. I laid them down in despair; this was but the note of the mocking-bird with a vengeance. (*The Bird of Time*⁴)

Hence, Edmund Gosse has advised her to write no more about robins and skylarks instead suggested her to imbibe the true Indian hue in her poems so that they may sound more indigenous:

[...] I ventured to speak to her sincerely. I advised the consignment of all that she had written, in this falsely English vein, to the waste-paper basket. 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, not a re`chauffe` of Anglo-Saxon sentiment in an Anglo-Saxon setting, but some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East long before the West had begun to dream that it had a soul.⁽⁵⁾

After the valuable advice of her mentor Edmund Gosse, Sarojini Naidu, without much delay started acting in accordance to his suggestions and the outcome was the collection of her poems entitled, *The Golden Threshold* and from this first collection of her to all her later works, she sang in full-throated ease of Indianness. A consequence of this filling of Indian feeling into British bottle was the positive review which proved the potential of Sarojini Naidu as a poet and paved her way into the realm of poetry. Sarojini Naidu cherished her writings about Indian festivals, Indian objects, and Indian people. Her poems got a unique identity because of their scenic description, picturesque style, and lyricism. Blend of Indian symbols with mysticism in her poetry brings an ardent nationalism fully-loaded with age-old Indian transcendentalism. When her native fervour was superimposed upon her musical poetic composition, the resultant was a great poet profoundly known as the ‘Nightingale of India’.

Her first poetry collection *The Golden Threshold* was flooded with Indian themes and Indian subjects. Folk-songs of India and the common life of her native-men formed the major portion of this collection. From the daily life of “Indian Weavers” to the songs of “Palanquin-Bearers”; from the “Snake-Charmer” to the “Indian Dancer”; from the “Village-Song” to the “Cradle-song”; from the beauty of Zeb-Un-Nissa to the duty of Damayante, all were scattering Indian hue only, and the major thrust of those poems lies in



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the celebration of Indianness. Her second collection of poem, *The Bird of Time* has also maintained the spirit of Indianness with the sole Indian folk-lyrics like, “In the Bazaars of Hyderabad”, “The Festival of Serpents”, “Songs of Radha, the Milkmaid”, “Vasant Panchami”, etc. I would like to quote some lines from her poem, “Bangle-Sellers” which are self-sufficient to denote the peculiar theme of Indianness which Mrs. Naidu has chiefly tried to portray in her collection of poems:

BANGLE-SELLERS are we who bear
Our shining loads to the temple fair...
Who will buy these delicate, bright
Rainbow-tinted circles of light?
Lustrous tokens of radiant lives,
For happy daughters and happy wives. (*The Sceptred Flute* 108)

Sarojini Naidu, in some of her poems, has also talked upon the in-depth issues like Indian mysticism. Poems like “To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus”, “The Soul’s Prayer” are an ardent example of her thirst to know more about Indian occultism, and in some of her poems from the collection *The Bird of Time* like “Ecstasy” and “Solitude”, there is a visible transformation from this transient earthly world to the eternal and supernatural world.

Many critics have put allegations upon Sarojini Naidu that her poetry is nothing but an outcome of mimesis of the British Romantic poets. According to Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, “In the wake of Modernist styles and their heady excitement, Sarojini Naidu was dismissed by many as a sentimentalist and a mere imitator of Victorian ways, and not relevant to poetry” (Saxena 76). If she was imitating her colonizers then readers can feel no wrong in it as the whole theory of Post-colonialism propagates the fact that colonized people are bound to do the mimicry of their colonizers. It was quite reasonable to write in their language and their style because of the ‘Binary Opposition Theory’. And if she was merely imitating the colonizers and producing nothing of any importance, she must not be able to write ‘in the forms familiar to the West’ with a ‘soul of the East’. Sarojini Naidu never cared about what people would think or what they have to say instead she followed only the voice of her heart. At the tender age of fifteen, she fell in love with a young doctor named Govindarajulu Naidu, and that she falls in love at the first sight. She possessed a heart filled with soft-emotions which further helped her in composing some beautiful love-lyrics.

Aghorenath Chattopadhyay was such an open-minded person that he did not care about the caste of that young doctor but his prime concern was bad health and tender age of his daughter plus he wanted to let sometime to pass-on so that his daughter can better understand whether her feelings for that doctor was deep and long-lasting or mere infatuation. This thought-process of her father depicts that from him Sarojini Naidu has inherited the spirit of free thought. Later, when she came back to India after her study in Cambridge, she finally married with that doctor and it was that time when inter-caste marriages were not permitted even in dreams. This was her matter and much detailed discussion upon it was not needed, but as she let not this major decision of her life get entangled in any social restrictions, it proves as a vital point to showcase her thinking process that she wanted to pave her way and was ready to live a life on her terms.

After the marriage, when a lady is blessed with a loving husband and four healthy children, she would probably like to dwell in the happiness of domestic life. But this was not the case with Sarojini Naidu; she was not ready to live a life of contentment when her Indian brothers and sisters were tolerating the predicament of plight. As her veins were filled with patriotic fervour, so she was not ready to sit silently



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under the peace of her four walls rather she decided to be a part of the Indian Freedom Movement. She joined the Independence Movement in the wake of the Bengal-Partition of 1905. When she was not ready to follow the obstacles or hindrances imposed or practised by her society, which was quite obvious when she did an inter-caste marriage at that time, then, it was quite obvious that she was not ready to see her motherland bound in shackles. In her poetry collection *The Broken Wing*, there is a poem dedicated to Mohamed Ali Jinnah entitled “Awake”, which clearly shows such thoughts of Mrs. Naidu:

WAKEN, O mother! thy children implore thee,
Who kneels in thy presence to serve and adore thee!
The night is aflush with a dream of the morrow,
Why still dost thou sleep in thy bondage of sorrow? (*The Broken Wing*55)

After her active participation in Indian Freedom Movement, she met, got heavily influenced, and later befriended with Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru, and many other freedom-fighters. She not only attended all the major campaigns enthusiastically, appealed Indian women to join in this national movement for freedom, but also being a creative artist, she delivered some speeches full of passion and eloquence to charge Indians with native zeal and wrote some beautiful poems upon such issues. She also dedicated her poems to great leaders like Mr. Gandhi and Mr. Gokhale. In her poem, “To India” from *The Golden Threshold*, by addressing to India as Mother, she has tried to unite all Indians as the sons and daughters of the Mother-India and tried to retell Indian people the glory of their motherland from time immemorial.

O YOUNG through all thy immemorial years!
Rise, Mother, rise, regenerate from thy gloom,
And, like a bride high-mated with the spheres,
Beget new glories from thin ageless womb!

.....

Thy Future calls thee with a manifold sound
To crescent honours, splendours, victories vast;
Waken, O slumbering Mother, and be crowned,
Who once was empress of the sovereign Past. (*The Sceptred Flute*58)

Britishers had always believed in ‘Divide and Rule Policy’. So they had tried to divide Indians based on caste and cultures, especially their target were the Hindus and the Muslims. Mrs. Naidu knew their intention so she has always worked upon the issue of Hindu- Muslim unity and delivered many speeches upon it. In a lecture delivered at a Public Meeting held under the auspices of the Historical Society, Pachaiyappa’s College, 1903 Sarojini Naidu said, “I am neither a Bengalee, nor Medrassee, nor Hyderabaddee but I am an Indian, (cheers), not a Hindu, not a Brahmin, but an Indian to whom my Mahomedan brother is as dear and as precious as my Hindu brother” (Naidu 9). This issue of Hindu-Muslim unity was not limited to her speech only but being a truly creative artist she allowed her pen to unite the nation. In her very first collection, *The Golden Threshold* she has composed a poem entitled “An Anthem of Love” in which she has beautifully portrayed that of course we Hindus and Muslims are two, two to serve our motherland but one to safeguard her and to love her:

Two hands are we to serve thee, o our Mother,
To strive and succour, cherish and unite;



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Two feet are we to cleave the waning darkness,
And gain the pathways of the dawning light.
.....

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. (*The Sceptred Flute* 131)

Sarojini Naidu has talked upon the issue of unity in many of her poems. She became a prominent freedom-fighter and a passionate writer and an influential feminist. She has raised her voice against foreign rule, women's education, caste and class discrimination in not only India but also in foreign countries like England, Africa, Sri Lanka, and the U.S.A. She also has worked as the member of the Constituent Assembly which was formed to frame the Constitution of India.

Conclusion

Thus, from an imitator of her colonizers to her role as a ferocious female freedom-fighter, despite her fragile health, Sarojini Naidu has proved herself to be a kind of pioneer in Indian Women Poetry in English. She has one leg in colonial India imitating like colonizers, and one in free India, and that too by tolerating many sufferings including her imprisonment for twenty-one months during the Quit India Movement of 1942, which ultimately proves her as a bridge between Colonial and Independent India. She would better be remembered as an amalgamation of a freedom-fighter, a poet, a politician, and the first female Governor of Uttar Pradesh.

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