

The Poetry of Sarojini Naidu

The conquest of India by the British must be ranked, in the hierarchy of world changes, with the subjugation of the Western World by Rome. In the same way as the Latin language became the cultural vehicle of Christianity – the sacred vessel whence flowed the holy water of doctrine – so has the English language become the common medium of expression for the cultured of more than one great nation. The result for the world is incalculable. The waters of Vedic wisdom flow through the language which Shakespeare spoke, and a mighty mingling is brought about – of religion, of art, and of philosophy. It is with an instance of this confluence in art that I propose to deal.

Having learned this difficult language of ours – and learned it with an ease which sometimes amazes us, the cultured Indian began to employ it to express his thoughts, his ideals and aspirations. What he uttered, he recorded; and this was prose. But while engaged in the study of some of our great national classics, and with the memory of his own, perhaps, still fresh in his mind, he was tempted to embody his prayers and praises in verse – to endeavour to catch his flying fancies in the gem-net of poetry. This was a difficult undertaking. E.V. Lucas has written an amusing essay on the earliest of these pioneers. But in the end he succeeded, or perhaps we should say *she* succeeded; for the two most successful exponents of this assimilative poetic culture were women: Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between the characters of these two daughters of modern India. Inflicted upon the former was an early and lamented death: a precocious genius, secluded from the crowd, obscure, while the latter is still vitally among us. The greater part of her life has been passed in the storm of politics, and in the full glare of public light. As this is not a comparative essay on the merits of the two poets we will not pursue the comparison further. Only in their song were they alike, in their love of India, and in their full and perfect Indian womanhood.

Sarojini Naidu* was born in 1879. Her father was Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya: she was thus one of a family which has given many brilliant sons and daughters to India. Her brother Harindranath was an accomplished and precocious poet; his first play being produced when he was only ten years of age, when his poetry had already won him appreciation. His political sympathies are strong, and he has recently published dramas in which the crudities of Socialism are incongruously mixed with the subtleties of Maeterlinckian symbolism.* His sister, however, has not allowed her politics directly to invade her verse. She married and had four children – to each of whom she addresses a stanza of a charming poem – and was subsequently bereaved of her husband; whom she had married in the face of strong opposition from her family (for he was of a lower caste). In public life for many years she has been an associate of Mahatma Gandhi, being imprisoned with him four times for defying the ordinances of the British Raj, in which exploit she displayed remarkable courage, and seems to have enjoyed doing so. Not only was she a prominent member of Congress, but she was so much a leader of men that she climbed into its presidential chair – the peak of every Indian Nationalist's ambition. She differs from most of her compatriots, however, in having a patriotism which is neither Muslim nor Hindu, but Indian. She travelled widely in the interests of her country, arousing enthusiasm wherever she went. She was for many years the centre of Indian social,

political, and intellectual life, to say nothing of her literary influence, which is enormous. She created a sort of salon on the French model, to which flocked all the cultured of the age, including distinguished foreigners on tour. She was at the disposal of everybody. But sometimes, it must be confessed, she wearied of this brilliant life, and the cry escaped from her lips:

“Oh I am tired of strife and song and festivals and fame
And long to fly where cassia-woods are breaking into flame.”

That longing was to remain with her all her life. It was in the service of her country that she gave up the simple things of human existence; she was unable to reconcile the two. Hers was no life of “languid and sequestered ease” such as was enjoyed by so many of the daughters of ancient India; and it was certainly no “revolving dream.” Like Milton, for a while she sacrificed her song upon the altar of her country. This should never be forgotten. Her poetry is not the product of a woman cloistered from society and the world, as we are apt to imagine an Indian woman to be; but of one living in the midst of the rich activity of life, sharing it with others and enjoying it herself.

Although there is much of India in her poetry, there is but little politics – and here, too, is her impartiality shown. For not only is there a sonnet to Mahatma Gandhi, but a longer poem addressed to Mohammed Ali Jinnah also. It seems that Sarojini Naidu’s poetry is chiefly the recreation of her hours of leisure, rather than the serious business of her life, hours in which she rose up from the deep waters of existence which encompassed her, and played on the surface for a while, laughing to see the sunlight as it sparkled on the waves and on the slow dance of the foam-flowers. Sometimes she even saw a rainbow; but sometimes she saw the storm flash its lightnings across the heavens. Then she descended into the deeps again, and answered the call. But the memory of the beauty she had seen was always with her.

A poet’s sources may be divided into two classes: those having their roots in the past, in literature; and those having their roots in the present, in life. Not that the two indeed are wholly discrete; for at points they juxtapose and run into each other. But generally speaking a poet is influenced first of all by what he has read, whence comes his technique; and secondly by what he has experienced, whence comes his material. For with a precocious poet – and most poets are precocious – the library is at first a more familiar place than the world. Some poets, of course, stay in the library and never get any further, and are known as literary poets: they make good translators.

Like Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu drank deep from the wells of ancient heroic verse; the battles and loves of old India thrilled in her veins and made her heart beat faster. She sings of

“...Valmiki’s heroes bold -
Rubies girt in epic gold...”

And in another poem she collects in one great nosegay the names of all those flower-like women of old India who became famous through their devotion to love and duty – such as Sita, Savitri, and Dvanpadi. Savitri it was who willingly would give up her own life to save her husband’s, as related in one of Toru Dutt’s finest poems, “Savitri.” Sarojini Naidu never forgot how great India had been in the past, and there glorious and still-living examples of its ancient culture helped to remind her of it. Her dream is to revive in the future – or, if possible, *now* – the splendours of the past. But there is no mention of the weakness of the Indian people, as there is in Vivekananda;

although she must have had bitter experience of it. For she is cast in the generous and heroic mould of the women of old whom she admires, and expects to find in others the same strength as she is conscious of possessing herself.

Sanskrit poetry, as such, and apart from its subject-matter, has influenced her own poetry but little. She retains a few traditional images, which it is the privilege of every poet to use, and this is all. Persian poetry, however, and the poetry of the colloquial languages, seems to have had slightly more influence upon her; although it is still not distinct enough to be traced to any particular poet or poets. She has translated a poem from the Persian of Zeb-un-Nissa, the white maiden of the Imperial Palace at Agra, whose fortunes afford good material to the historical novelist (if a second Myers is about to appear), and another from the Urdu: and one of her poems she entitles "A Persian Love Song." The influence of Sufism is easily discerned, especially in the last plaintive verse:

"Hourly this subtle mystery flowers anew,
Oh Love, I know not why...
Unless it be, perchance, that I am you,
Dear love, that you are I!"

In contrast with this is the frank and laughing naturalism of the "Rajput Love Song," with its charming refrain:

*"Haste, O wild-bee hours, to the gardens of the sunset!
Fly, wild-parrot day, to the orchards of the West!
Come, O tender night, with your sweet consoling darkness,
And bring me my Beloved to the shelter of my breast!"*

Mrs. Naidu is a poet in the full English poetic tradition; she is not afraid of comparison. Some of our modern poets seem to be making an effort to be as different from their predecessors as possible. Sometimes they succeed very well; but they must not call it poetry. Mrs Naidu makes no such efforts; and the consequence is that she has an originality which is unmistakable. All the influences that are recognisable are superficial, and her verse would have been much the same as it is without them. Perhaps the deepest is traceable to Indian street-songs. There are traces that these "folk-songs,"* if indeed they may be so called, have had an influence upon her analogous to that of the Border-ballads upon Scott. They also afford a point of contact between her style and her material. For the streets and market-places, the bazaars and villages, where these songs were sung, occupy a prominent position in her pages. The whole gamut of her political activity – love of India – is stamped upon every page she wrote. It is the same thing, only in a different form. She did not commit her brother's (literary) mistake of trying to make one a medium for the other. *The Sceptred Flute* is a crowded canvas of Indian life; it tells us more about the country and its people than a whole library of travellers' books. And seeing them in the company of an Indian, and one who has the deepest interests of her countrymen continually in her heart, we are able to penetrate into their profoundest places, into that which makes them live – from the temporal, to the eternal; from the shadow, to the substance; from the image to the god which it represents. For not only does she sing songs of bangles and street-cries, of corn-grinders and palanquin-bearers, of spinning and Indian dances, of henna, wandering singers, and snake-charmers – the temporal side of life; but she sings, also, of the festivals of those special manifestations of the Eternal, the great religions. With deific impartiality she tells of the festivals of Hindus and Muslims alike; joins, for a moment, in the

lamentation at the Imam Bara, where, in the month Moharram, the Shiah community wails for the deaths of Ali, Hassan, and Hussain; sings hymns to Kali, to Lakshmi, to Indra; lingers for a while in the Forest of Brindaban, and hears the music of the Divine Flute-Player, Sri Krishna; meditates for a while before an image of the Buddha, and recites the "Prayer of Islam." She can enter into all temples, and find the same God in every one; for every faith she has unfailing sympathy. This sympathy is not the result of an intellectual integration of the metaphysical features of each religion, as it is apt to be in the West; but of the realisation that they are all daughters – if only by adoption – of the one mother, India.

"Hindus: Mother! The flowers of our worship have crowned thee!

Parsees: Mother! The flame of our hope shall surround thee!

Mussulmans: Mother! The sword of our love shall defend thee!

Christians: Mother! The song of our faith shall attend thee!

All Creeds: Shall not our dauntless devotion avail thee?

Hearken! O queen and O goddess, we hail thee!"

These lines were recited, appropriately enough, at the opening of the Indian National Congress in 1915. If such a spirit continues to guide her statesmen, there is no doubt but that India will again be numbered among the great nations of the earth.

From the works of every poet there may be deduced, if not a philosophy, at least an attitude to life and its problems. That attitude – and ultimately it is a philosophy, too, and a religion – which characterises the poetic work of Sarojini Naidu may be defined, in a word, as *acceptance*. She accepts the whole of life in just the same way as she accepts the handful of special manifestations of it, the religious. This acceptance is not toleration, but a tasting of it, and a participating in it, as a personal experience. She is eager to live life, not merely to study it. When she was a child, she tells us, she prayed:

*"Give me to drink each joy and pain
Which thine eternal hand can mete,
For my insatiate soul would drain
Earth's utmost bitter, utmost sweet."*

Mere knowledge that these extremes of pleasure and pain exist is not enough to satisfy her craving for them; she must experience them all. Fame has been hers and love and laughter, and the sorrow of bereavement; and they have been hers more intensely than they come to most: for she is a poet. And what is the result of all this experience? What has she learned about life? In the explicit terms of philosophy one answer is possible to this question; but we can quote a verse of one of her poems to help us:

*"Tarry a while, till I am satisfied
Of love and grief, of earth and altering sky;
Till all my human hungers are fulfilled,
O Death, I cannot die!"*

She is too conscious of the rich potentiality of life within her to be able to deny any of it; it must all bear fruit for her. And what then? This "Death" which creeps in at the last line, what is it,

how does she define it? Like a true poet, she gives us no formal definition of it at all; but she does tell us of her experience of it. She sees life in death, and death in life, and God in all things; and this experience of life and death, of joy and pain, is the experience of God, although through a thousand veils.

The last and most remarkable part of *The Sceptred Flute* is entitled "The Temple, A Pilgrimage of Love," and is prefaced by the words, from Rabindranath Tagore:

"My passion shall burn as the flame of Salvation,
The flower of my love shall become the ripe fruit of Devotion."

There is nothing else like these poems in the whole range of English literature. They may perhaps be paralleled only by the songs of Chaitanya Deva and Ramprasad, or by some of the odes and ghazels of the Persian Sufi poets; but there is still a difference. She sees man, or *a* man, as God; whereas they see God as man, etc. This may appear to be a distinction without a difference; but anyone well acquainted with the mysticism of either East or West will recognise that this is not so. All that Sarojini Naidu has learned about life finds its completest and most perfect expression in these poems. All her previous joys, sorrows, anxieties and fears, with the whole gamut of her religious and emotional life, are found fused together in this one concept of Love. For her, like Dante, it is "Love which moves the sun in heaven, and all the stars." All her life is dedicated to Love; it is the whole of existence. And because it is the whole of existence it is possible to rise from the grosser to the finer forms of it; from love of man to love of God. It is essentially a process of sublimation. In Indian philosophy this is known as Bhakti-Yoga, which is the realisation of the Absolute God by devotion to Him in a personal form. This form may be that of a god, a teacher, a wife or child, or a lover. Indeed, some bhaktas assert that that love for God is highest which is typified by an illicit connection; and this element enters into Sarojini Naidu's poetry. For savage intensity, for the sense of surpassing ecstasy and complete abandon, we shall have to go a long way to find the equal of these poems. They are indeed a breviary of love. Towards the end of the collection she affords us a glimpse of how this process of sublimation is accomplished – by pain and suffering in "Invocation":

"Stoop not from thy proud, lonely sphere,
Star of my Trust!
But shine implacable and pure,
Serene and just;
And bid my struggling spirit rise
Clean from the dust!

Still let thy chastening wrath endure.
O be thou still
A radiant and relentless flame,
A crucible
To shatter and shape anew
My heart and will.

Still be thy scorn the burning height
My feet must tread,
Still be thy grief the bitter crown

That bows my head,
Thy stern, arrainging silences
My daily bread!

So shall my yearning love at last
Grow sanctified,
Thro' sorrow find deliverance
From mortal pride.
So shall my soul, redeemed, re-born,
Attain thy side."

Not only are these poems marked off from the others by their subject-matter, but by their style also; it is simpler, freer, and more direct. In her earlier poems we find a free, swinging rhythm, which can also be very subtle; a bold use of metaphor; a keen sense of the meaning, flavour, and balance of words, and a faultless ability to combine them into enchanting patterns. So perfect is her use of English that it ceases to be a compliment to attribute it to her. There is no unevenness, no failing of inspiration; evidently, only her best has been published. She is the poet of perfection, perfection of phrase, of line, of verse, and of the whole poem; she is thus eminently quotable. One of her devices is the use of a series of antitheses, which gives balance and precision to her poems. All these virtues are collected in her later verses; but here she is absolutely mistress of them all. There is no striving for effect, even though, before, she always strove successfully; everything comes easily and naturally, like a rush of words from the heart. But although they are not so highly-wrought as their predecessors, these poems are not unpolished. But here the finish is that of Velasquez, rather than of Le Brun. They constitute her undying legacy to posterity. Although her earlier works were known in England and America to a few discerning critics, such as Arthur Symons and Sir Edmund Gosse (he it was who first hailed the star of Toru Dutt rising on the horizon), and to a small public interested in the cultivation of English letters, her later poems are not so well known. It is hoped that these few lines of tribute from an admirer of her poetry and personality may serve to awaken interest in them. They would provide a useful discipline to some of the more unruly of our younger poets.

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* (i) For fuller biographical details (this is only a sketch) see A.J. Symons' Introduction to *The Golden Threshold*; Anand's *The Golden Breath*; and *Sarajini Devi*, Ramula, Madras, etc.

* (ii) See *Five Plays*, Madras, 1937.

* (iii) The 1st and 6th Parts of *The Sceptred Flute* are called Folk Songs and Indian Folk Songs respectively.