

Sarojini Naidu: A Feminist and Political Activist

By

Dr. Farhat Easar

C/o. Prof. Shahabuddin Ahmed

South of Gandhi Maidan, Siwan

Bihar.

Sarojini Chattopadhyay Naidu was an Indian and Political activist. A proponent of civil rights, woman's emancipation and was an important figure in Indian's struggle for freedom. She was the first Indian woman to be president of Indian National Congress and to be an Indian state governor. She was a great poet and thinker of womankind of the early period in Indian English literature. She portrayed in her poetry beautiful pictures of Indian scenes, culture, civilization and purely Indian characters with the viewpoint of a woman's yearning. She highlighted the pangs of widowhood which leads a woman to preferring death to survival. She beautifully raised her voice against the 'Suttee-Pratha', which was a burning social problem prevailing in the pre-independence period. Love and jealousy are the essential characteristics of the female world. As a feminist thinker, she has attacked the weakness of the jealousy-spirit in the fair sex. As a love poet she has highlighted the profundity and spirit of love which is neither Hindu nor Muslim nor Sikh, nor Christian. It is beyond the boundaries of caste, creed, sect and religion. As a feminist poet she has also attacked the Purdah system prevailing in the Muslim society. It cannot protect the chastity of a woman as it is a barrier on her chastity. She was rightly called the Nightingale of India because she had 'the God-gifted organ voice' and her poetry mirrors a true picture of Indian scenes deeply soaked in Indian culture and civilization. "Wandering Beggars", "Wandering Singers", "Snake-charmers", "Palanquin Bearers", "The Flute-player of Brindaban", "Song of Radha", "The Milkmaid", "Vasant Panchami", "Raksha Bandhan" - all these poems reveal the real story of Indian society And Indian characters that make her stand out among the greatest feminist thinkers in the world although not one of the now popular combative and militant ones.

Sarojini Naidu's first major collection of poems, *The Golden Threshold* (1905), was published when she was twenty-six. She dedicated the book to "Edmund Gosse who first showed me the way to the Golden Threshold" (Paranjape 5). And Arthur Symons was responsible for its publication. *The Bird of Time* (1912) was published with an introduction by Gosse. *The Broken wing* (1917), her third publication, was included in *The Sceptred Flute*, published by Dodd, Mead and Co., New York in 1937. *The Feather of Dawn*, a book of poems edited by her daughter Padmaja Naidu, was published in 1961, twelve years after the poet's death. *Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu* was a definitive collection published by G.A. Natesan, Madras in its third edition which came out in 1925. She was the first Indian woman to become the president of the Indian National Congress, the first woman governor of a state in independent India, the principal follower of Mahatma Gandhi and the best-known Indian woman of her time and an international figure as India's cultural ambassador and spokeswoman of the freedom-movement. She was an image of the liberal woman of India, who talked about women's education and the unity of India in U.S.A and England as "a cultural ambassador of east" (Qtd. in Iyengar 209). She was truly "Bharat Kokila" or the Nightingale of India as Gandhiji used to address her. She breathed her last on 2 March, 1949.

Sarojini Naidu's feminine sensibility started manifesting itself since her childhood and as, Arthur Symons felt, "this child had already lived through all a woman's life." (Qtd. in Iyengar 209) She decided to reveal the heart of India and stirred the soul of the East long before the West had begun to dream that it had a soul (Iyengar 209). She considered herself as a "wild free thing of the air like birds with a song in her heart" (Mehrotra 1) and, as the Governor of U.P., she expressed her feelings: "Look, I am like a

bird and they are trying to put me in a cage” (Mehrotra 17). There is always a quest for freedom in her poetic feelings and she feels a sense of loss for the swiftly fleeing away of childhood days with a flame of aspiration and finally,

..... The lyric child had grown into the lyric woman. All the instincts of her awakening womanhood for the intoxication of love and the Joy of life were deeply interfused with the more urgent and intimate need of poet soul for a perfect sympathy with its incommunicable vision, its suitable and inexpressible thought. (Iyengar 210-211).

As a feminist thinker she reflects her poetic sensibility while capturing the ethos of a woman as a bride, as a girl and as a queen of a palace in Hyderabad. She is a singer of woman's pains. Her poems reveal different moods and notes of her sensibility as a woman.

As feminist thinker, her heart knits a very fine picture of Indian weavers in "Indian Weavers" who are weaving cloth on their handlooms in different colours and designs. A questioner approaches the weavers and puts questions that they respond to. It is in the question-answer pattern. They are knitting day and night, morning and evening, for 'a new-born child, and for a 'bride' and also a shroud' for dead people. The concept of time and people is beautifully displayed in the poem. The poem opens with -

Weavers, weaving at break of day
Why do you weave a garment so gay?
Blue as the wings of a halcyon wild,
We weave the robes of a new-born child.

(Paranjape 59)

One can find her feminine fervour in the symbols and imagery of the poem. Fate, the great architect of human life, which governs the universal belief of man in the super power of God-Fate, governs the cycle of birth, life and death. Selection of colours in the poem is also symbolic according to Hindu mythology. The Lord Brahma is designer of Fate according to Hindu mythology. 'The blue of halcyon wings' in the first stanza suggests Vishnu, the God of prosperity - Marriage, wealth and splendour - who is sitting in the blue sea on a lotus. It corresponds to the peacock plumes in the second stanza, a symbol of prosperity and happiness. The white feather is symbolic of death, which suggests the power of destruction in the hands of Rudra. The different robes for a child, a bride and a dead man suggest the tragedy and comedy of human life that she has concretised in the poem for poetic realization and visualisation.

Sarojini Naidu was an active participant in the struggle for India's freedom and as one of the leaders of Women's emancipation, she has depicted her feminine sensibility in her occasional pieces like "Suttee" or "The Purdah Nashin". She has attacked the unjust social customs with romantic notes that idealize her real self as a woman. As a feminist thinker she has drawn a beautiful living picture of the wretched Indian woman who have to take up the rigorous work of Corn-grinding in early morning hours in the poem 'Corn-Grinders', and at their grinding wheels, singing a pathetic song, which externalises their life-experiences. The old women - the corn-grinders question and answer as she mouse and she-deer and present the pain and misery of a suffering woman.

O little bride, why dost thou weep
With all the happy world asleep?

And the bride replies

Alas! Alas! my lord is dead!
Ah, who will stay these hungry tears,
Or still the want of famished years
And crown with love my marriage-bed?

(Paranjape, 50-60)

One can feel human feelings in the story of the she-deer and the she-mouse who have lost their partners like the Hindu widow. The story leads to path of pathos as her bridegroom is no more and now there is none to console her love-stricken soul. It happened to be in a rich farmer's granary where it was trapped and killed. It is a story of separation and loss of happiness. The question goes on to a she-deer regarding the cause of its sorrow. It replies that its lord went to "drink beside the river head" where it was shot dead by a hunter and now she is helpless and lonely. Lastly, they ask a bride why she weeps "with all the happy world asleep". She responds that her husband is departed and now no one will stay these hungry tears. We can notice how the story of misery runs from the animal world to the human world.

As a feminist poet she has attacked the needless Purdah system prevailing in the Muslim society in the poem 'The Purdah Nashin', Purdah' covers the sorrowful face of a woman and nobody knows the misery of her fears for subtle years behind her such crying and weeping face of a woman that Naidu has presented in her fanciful poem.

Time lights the curtain unawares,
And sorrow looks into her face
Who shall prevent the subtle years
Or shield a woman's eyes from tears.

(Paranjape 70)

She has scattered the fragrance of her feminine sensibility in the romantic portrayal of the Iranian king Feroj and his queen Gulnaar, peerless in beauty, having all the comforts and all the beauty.

She gazes in her mirror and sighs...
O king, my heart is unsatisfied.

Sarojini Naidu's poem "The Queen's Rival" is a fine poem revealing her perception of feminine psychology. In the tradition of Freud, she tells us that women are jealous of their daughters-in-law because they consider them their potential rivals. They remind them of their own faded beauty, their daughters are what they themselves once were. It is based on her personal experience of her own daughter and the poem is an outcome of her own psychological compulsions. The king was surprised and asked the queen if she could desire for more, when she had everything. She thus responds:

Queen Gulnaar sighed like a murmuring rose,
Give me rival, O king Firoj

(Gokak 147)

Messengers are sent and made to run all over the world. They return with seven beautiful damsels, who are all brought before her. None of them could become worthy of being the queen's rival in beauty. But she happens to feel the need of a rival. Her daughter has become two-spring-time old. She sets her curls and looks into the mirror and kisses swiftly and gladly. On seeing such actions of hers, the queen bursts out with pleasure that she has got her rival now.

As a keen observer, she has honestly evoked "the jealousy-spirit among women" which depicts her feminine sensibility. She was a great feminist in the Indian context who brought the problems and predicaments of women to the surface and cultivated a new awareness among the people of a growing civilization so that they might realize the strength of women of "women-power".

In the poem 'Dirge' her feminine consciousness strikes a heart-touching and painful picture of woman's bereavement and its tone suggests great loss of her miseries of widowhood. The widow has to suffer the "yearning pain of unfulfilled delight". She has highlighted how a widow in India is like a body without soul, a flower without fragrance, a tree without blossom and a river without water. She was quite against widowhood.

We may say that M.K. Gandhi rightly called her the 'Nightingale of India' as she identified herself with and represented the feminine shades of Indian society and its culture, custom, creed and tradition. Her feminine responses in her poems uniquely express the philosophy of Nature. Like Wordsworth, she establishes the bond of love and the ever-lasting relationship with Nature and Man and believes that nature is a permanent source of peace and Joy and man would be in communion with the blessings and beauties of nature for getting the tranquility of mind and the strength of heart. Sarojini Naidu loved to be in the Island of Coromandel, a wonderful gift of Nature, where she loved to settle with her heart in the body like W.B. Yeats in the Island of Innisfree As a feminist thinker, she has sung the song of Indian glory and has tried to establish superiority of her culture, philosophy and civilization in the world. Her feminine heart is also sensitive towards the burning problem of Suttee-Pratha prevailing mostly in the pre-independence period. Her feminine sensibility forces us to think of the pathetic cry of a suttee who prefers death to survival without her husband in the world which is meaningless, worthless and shameful to her. She helplessly loves to meet her husband in the heaven by projecting her on to flame of fire. It is condemned by Sarojini Naidu as it is a social evil and she emphasized that remarriage of widows must be encouraged. She has also brought to light jealousy, ambition and love as the weaknesses of the female heart and head.

In nutshell, she stands out as a great genius, as a sensitive feminist, a sound singer of human emotions, a visionary thinker, an architect of Indian culture, an ardent patriot and political activist. She is a spiritual voyager of love and singer of "The still sad music of humanity". But in all shades and colours she is essentially a woman poet and the mother of struggling humanity. It is pertinent to quote a critic who declared "Tagore will love and Sarojini will live". Her songs are universal in appeal and her feminine sensibility is all-pervasive and is creatively revealed in her poetry. In terms of the evolution of women's writings in India she represents 'the early creative release of feminine sensibility' and aspiring spirit of womanhood.

Works Cited

Iyengar, K.R.S.; Indian Writing in English: New Delhi: Sterling, 1984

Mehrotra, K.K.; "The Poetry of Sarojini Naidu", Essays and Studies; Allahabad, 2nd Ed. 1970,

Paranjape, Makarand; Sarojini Naidu: Selected Poetry and Prose; New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers, India, 1993

Gokak, V.K.; The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry: 1828-1965; Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1970.