

Sarojini Naidu as a Writer of Love-Lyrics

Dr. Afshan Nahid

Assistant Professor (Adhoc)

M.G. College, Gaya

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Abstract

Sarojini Naidu is a writer of lyrics which have beauty and charm, delicate fancy and gossamer imagination, emotional fervour and sensuousness. Her poems reveal her sex. Talking of them, Arthur Symons wrote, "It is for this bird-like quality of song that they are to be valued". More than one third of bulk of her poetry is devoted to a lyrical presentation of the bliss of love and pathos of separation. Some of her typical love-lyrics are Ecstasy, Song of Radha, The Milk Maid, A Persian Love-Song, In a Time of Flowers, Humayun to Zobeida, Devotion etc. In the poem *Alabaster* she gives us a clear description of her heart:

Like this alabaster box whose art is frail
as a cassia-flower, is my heart, carven
with delicate dreams and wrought with
many a subtle and exquisite thought.
Therein I treasure the spice and scent of
rich and passionate memories blent like
odours of cinnamon, sandal and clove,
of song and sorrow and life and love,

(*Alabaster* p. 24)

Keywords- Sarojini Naidu, Imagination, Emotional, Sensuousness, Love-Lyrics

Sarojini Naidu enjoys immense popularity in two fields- Indo-Anglian poetry and the history of the Indian struggle for Independence. She got recognition as a poet not because of her political influence as some critics have opined. Her poetic fame has nothing to do with her role in politics. One may get an idea for her poetic

stature by looking at the honours and critical praise she received during and after her lifetime both at home and abroad. A recipient of the Kaisar-i-Hindi gold medal of poetry, she was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. An honorary Doctor's Degree was conferred on her by Allahabad University. Her lyrical genius was recognised when she was given the titles of 'the Nightingale of India', and 'Bharat Kokila'. Her poetry readings at Lahore and Allahabad impressed the people and gave them an idea of her poetic powers. She was the first President of India P.E.N and presided over the All India writers' Conference held at Jaipur, October 1945, which was attended, among other, by E.M. Forster.

Sarojini Naidu's poetry has been the subject of many Ph.D Theses such as V.N. Bushan's "The Music-Maker: A Critical Estimate of Mrs. Naidu's poetry" (1933) and of seven book-length studies and 40 articles and chapters mentioned in the bibliography, apart from numerous reviews, comments and introductions. After the publication of *The Golden Threshold*, she was widely acclaimed as a poet. Her poems received excellent reviews and were given a wide coverage in the British Press. *The Yorkshire Post* declared; "Mrs. Naidu has not only enriched our language, but has enabled us to grow into intimate relation with the spirit, the emotions, the mysticism and the glamour of the East." It was not a mere courtesy when Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symons hailed her a poet of rare charm and technical accomplishment. W. B. Yeats called her a 'pure romantic' and Edward Thomas praised her poetry. Her name entered the literary history of England and she was counted among the greatest of the English poets when her three poems were given an honoured place in the *Oxford Book of English Mystic Verse* (1917). This is further confirmed by George Sampson's note her poetry in *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*. Thus,

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Sarojini Naidu was a poet of high order in her own way.

A study of Sarojini Naidu's poetry is a delightful affair. She is a poet of colour and melody and beauty while by her poems, one is bound to be deeply involved in her aesthetic response to things. A poem like the following can send him into raptures over the poet's lyrical feel of the bliss and *Ecstasy* of love:

Cover mine eyes, O my love Mine eyes
that are weary of bliss. As of light that
is poignant and strong, O silence my
lips with a kiss, My lips that are weary
of song! (*Ecstasy*, 26)

It is impossible not to notice the romantic fervour, the felicity of expression and the intensity of feeling conveyed in an extremely sensuous style in the above stanza of her representative love-lyric. The poem is charged with the drive of feeling as much as with sensuousness. Love is the essence of woman's existence. It knows no barriers. A girl of sweet and romantic temperament, Sarojini tastes its nectar at the age of sixteen when she fell in love with a man who was senior to her by ten years and was non-Brahmin caste. A short-lived separation could not freeze the spring of love in her and she was ultimately united with the man of her heart's desire in the permanent bond of marriage. Moreover, she was a woman of essentially lyrical talent and love is perennial theme of lyric poetry. Further, she was exposed to Persian poetry. Love has been the most inspiring theme of Persian poets; it has given the world some of the greatest treasures of romantic poetry, as also of divine love in Sufi poets. Sanskrit love poetry also influenced her.

The above factors perhaps explain the predominance of the theme of love in her poetic works. It is her major theme and, therefore, love-lyrics form an important part of her poems on other themes. According to Rameshwar Gupta who has counted her poems on love-theme, out of 184 poems, 66 are love-lyrics. In

chapter 5 of his book on Sarojini he has catalogued all these poems together. Her best love-poems are, however, contained in *The Peacock Lute*, a series of eight poems and *The Temple*, a series of 24 love-poems divided into 3 parts- *The Gate of Delight*, *The Path of Tears* and *The Sanctuary*, each part containing 8 poems. Critics have found her general love-lyrics more beautiful and poetically powerful than these poems. In general, Sarojini's love-lyrics are direct, sensuous and romantic. Her influence is seen in Harin's *Spring in Winter* (1955) especially poetic height and reveals 'the depth and intensity of the love-experience'.

As a love-poet Sarojini is a romantic idealist like Rabindranath Tagore whose verses she quotes as an epigraph to her *The Temple: A Pilgrimage of Love*:

My Passion shall burn as the flame of
Salvation.

The flower of my love shall become
the ripe fruit of Devotion. (*The Temple: A Pilgrimage of Love*, 42)

Her earlier love-poetry is romantic, though it takes on a devotional and mystical colour especially in her lyrics on Radha-Krishna theme and in *The Temple* which has love-lyrics following the concepts of Vaishnavism and the Radha-Krishna cult. The love-lyrics on Sri Krishna and Radha are *Song of Radha*, *the Milkmaid*, *The Flute Player of Brindaban* and the *Songs of Radha- At Dawn*, *At Dusk* and *The Quest*. These poems are an example of Sarojini's devotional love-poetry. She must have drawn her sustenance from Indian devotional love-poets who also influenced Tagore, and Tagore in turn influenced her. This is suggested by this category of love-poems. Radha is the eternal divine beloved of Lord Krishna. Her longing for absorption in his love is so acute that it reaches the state of self-effacement in love. Radha carried her curds to the Muthura fair. She should have cried, "Who will buy these curds...."

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But my heart was so full of your
 beauty, Beloved,
 The laughed as I cried without
 knowing:
 Govinda! Govinda!
 Govinda! Govinda! (*The Sceptred
 Flute; Songs of India* 69)

Though it is in the objective form of Indian folk song, yet the depth of feeling suggests that the poet has identified herself with Radha. We have it on record that this poem was a favourite of the poet and readers. Prof. Diwanchand bears witness of the fact that Sarojini Naidu recited this poem in a function; "One morning I was delighted to read the announcement of a lecture by Sarojini Naidu in the Hall of the Forman Christian College on the Mall (Lahore) on the subject of poetry.... But more valuable than her argument was the recital more than half a dozer of her poems, but the two, one about the Palanquin Bearers and the other *Radha, the Milk-Maid* still linger in my memory. The way she intoned the words and imparted a sense of the rhythm of these poems has even till no been unforgettable." And now the testimony of James H. Cousins; "My first contact with Mrs. Sarojini Naidu's poetry was through hearing the *Song of Radha, the Milkmaid* recited by an Oxford man in India. I shall never forget the mantric effect of the devotee's repetition of Govinda, Govinda, Govinda, Govinda", as she carried her curds, her pots and her gifts to the shrine of Mathura." The poem *The Flute Player of Brindaban* is not without mystic element and strikes a similar note of self-identification of the poet with Radha. The poem reveals the mood of total surrender which is specially notable in the second stanza of the poem. 'The Quest' also presents the ardent longing of Radha for Krishna. Thus, these love-lyrics reveal not only her devotional bent of mind but also her treatment of devotional love in lyrical pieces of moving poetry. Traces of love as depicted by Indian devotional love-poets are found in Sarojini's trilogy of love-lyrics. Poems

like *The Offering*, *The Lute Song*, *The Vision of Love* are marked by a devotional feeling of mystical kind. Padmini Sengupta says, "This passion for the human lovers is symbolic of the divine and Sarojini strives to reach metaphysical heights, but fails rather sadly, outpourings of the few mystical verses the previously wrote, three of which were good enough to be included in *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* in 1917" (432). Obviously these later lyrics and some earlier ones also are imbued with devotional feeling and mystical aura. They are in sharp contrast with her earlier love-poetry is characterizes by romantic as well as mystical approach to love. Love dominates the approach of Hafiz, Khayyam and Rumi. We may take the example of Hafiz. He is hailed as the greatest Sufi poet but he is at times very romantic, lyrical and amorous. Sarojini is also romantic and amorous in her earlier love-poems such as "A Rajput Love Song", "Indian-Love-Song", "A Love Song from the North" etc. Some of them are not without a certain romantic sensual longing. 'Ecstasy' is a case in point.

Love is a powerful force. Dull would he be of soul who cannot respond to its irresistible call. Sarojini responded to it at the age of sixteen bypassing all the barriers of caste and creed. *An Indian Love-Song* depicts Hindu beloved and a Muslim lover. *If You Call Me* also expresses the force of love. Sarojini Naidu gives full vent to her artistic and lyrical genius in portraying love that is a human desire but she also shows the triumph of divine love over the temptation of human desire. The Radha-Krishna legend provided her with a theme where she could successfully mingle human and spiritual love.

As a poet Sarojini Naidu is sensuous, romantic and lyrical. In her selfless love for nature, in her response to sensations of many kinds, in her glow of imagination and emotion, and in her luxuriant imaginary Sarojini is a true Romantic; her art is romantic and her

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sensibility is romantic. At her best her romanticism enriches her property; she delights in romantic pictures of life, be it love, Nature of the scenes of common life in India. Basant fires her poetic imagination, love creates ecstasy in her heart and common romantic pictures appeal to her sense of romance in life; in a melody of rare kind. English Romantic poets who shaped Indo-Anglian romanticism were a product of Romantic Revival, a return of Milton and the Elizabethans. The Elizabethan age was a nest of singing birds and abounded in poetry of romanticism, lyricism and glow of imagination. Keeping this background in mind, one may say that Sarojini is a singing bird belonging to the flock of Elizabethan poets. Rameshwar Gupta asserts, "Some of her poems can be compared with the best poems written in England during the period of her creative activity (1898-1914). And in the skill of composing lyrics in varied cadences, in melody of diction, in luxuriance of imagery and in bringing to life the bygone Indian scene with its undertone of simple joys and sorrows, Sarojini is yet to be equaled by any 'modern' Indo-English poet." (433).

In the very beginning of her poetical career Sarojini found a place in the international circles as an English writer of lyrics. Edmus Gosse and Arthur Symons sponsored her. But it is as Indo-Anglian poet that she will be remembered. And she did a lot for Indo-Anglian verse. She built a popular image of English poetry written by Indians. Her poetic achievement is her contribution to Indo-Anglian poetry. They are mainly two and have been recognized by her critics in different words. Sarojini's criticism is indiscriminately repetitive; and repetitive it is bound to be, for Sarojini's poetic output is not very large. Sarojini brought an authentic Indian note to Indo-Anglian poetry and enriched it by imparting to her lyrics 'a distinct melodic fervour'.

A. A. Ansari states, "The most characteristics quality of Sarojini Naidu's

poetry, besides its lyrical wealth, it is purely Indian character... Mrs. Naidu is the first poetess who has been able to synthesise there two disparate elements in the form of an art so complex and subtle, and with such superb success." (434)

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