

The Ecological Aspects in Sarojini Naidu's Poetic Imagery

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ABSTRACT: Through imagery a poet attempts to concretize his / her experiences or a state of mind so as to communicate it effectively and suggestively to the readers. For imagery poets often turn to myths, legends or nature. In this paper an attempt will be made to examine the ecological aspects in the poetic imagery of Sarojini Naidu, who belongs to the early phase of Indian writing in English. Popularly known as 'The Nightingale of India', Sarojini Naidu devoted her imaginative powers to the spirit of nationalism, together with the depiction of colonial and post-colonial Indian society in all its aspects --- economic, social, cultural and religious. This paper will explore how do the images, the poet borrows from myth and nature, portray the Indian people, their struggles, dreams and aspirations. There is a complete harmony between man, nature and myth in her poetry. Her attitude to nature is different from that of men. Possessing a hypersensitive nature of a woman, Sarojini was keenly alive to all the pleasures and bounties of nature. She would have a woman's fascination for a beautiful scene; for its colourfulness and softness. In her poetry the colour, the form and the sounds of nature, and those of the busy bazaars are integrated together to present a harmonious whole. Her similes and metaphors (take, for instance, 'The Palanquin Bearers'), fill the mind's eye with pictures of an elusive delicacy and beauty. The problems of contemporary Indian society are explicitly presented through myths, symbols and manifold nature images.

Keywords: Ecological Aspects, sarojini Naidu, Poetic Imagery

I. INTRODUCTION

Sarojini Naidu began writing verses at an early age, inheriting it from her parents. She gave glittering titles to her volumes of poetry; her titles are usually colourful, picturesque and symbolic: *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912), *The Broken Wing* (1917) and *The Feather of the Dawn* (1961). Sarojini infused into her poetry the bird like quality of a song, at once piercing and melodious. Despite her innate longing for the rapture of song, she was being irrevocably drawn into the social and the political life of her country. Her poetry does not fail to depict the life of Indian people in its various aspects – economic, social and religious. It presents a kaleidoscope of Indian scenes, sights, sounds and experiences transmuted into a fantastic vision of colour and rhythm. Of particular interest are those songs that deal directly or indirectly with ecological aspects. She draws her images from various sources like nature, society and myth and fuses them together to bring out a harmonious whole.

II. CONCEPT

Sarojini's concept of nature is tinged with her innate bent of romanticism. She is fascinated by the sights and sounds, colours and odours of natural objects. Her response to nature is circumstantial, inconsistent and dependent on mood. The poet is often seen taking a mere physical delight in nature, as William Wordsworth took in his boyhood days, but unlike him she is not eager to find any philosophical or mystical dimension in the objects of nature. In her choice of colourful, pictorial, sensuous, visual, auditory and olfactory nature

images, she echoes like John Keats and D.G. Rossetti:

The bright pomegranate buds unfold,

The frail wild lilies appear,

Like the blood-red jewels....

The winds are drunk with the odours breath

Of henna, sarisha and neem

(“In a Time of Flowers”, *The Bird of Time* p92)

The delicacy of language in this image is quite visible. The following verses from “Palanquin Bearers” (*The Golden Threshold*) remind us of Shelley when Sarojini Naidu employs a series of similes to depict an Indian social scene:

She sways like a flower in the wind of our song,

She skims like a bird in the foam of a stream

She floats like a laugh from the lips of a dream

(*The Sceptred Flute* p3)

It is totally an Indian image because foam is usually associated with sea, not stream. ‘Swimming’, ‘skimming’, ‘floating’ are good kinaesthetic images. The expression ‘she falls like a tear from the eye of a bird’ depicts suggestively a heart stirring social scene of a Indian bride's melancholic mood at the time of parting from her maternal home. Yet another expression ‘she springs like a stream on the brow of the tide’ is suggestive of spiritual illumination. It is a sudden ray of hope amidst despair. Like the romantics Sarojini uses nature imagery to express a desire for escape from

the din of urban life to find peace under the canopy of nature:

I am tired of painted roofs, and soft and silken floors

And long for wind blown canopies of crimson gulmohurs

("Summer Woods", *The Broken Wing* p190)

Sarojini has a woman's fascination for flowers and ornamental objects. There are repeated references to flowers like champa, jasmine, rose, lotus, poppy, cassia, lily, hyacinth, sirisha and neem. There is a rut of sensuous imagery and the various elements are so beautifully interwoven that we are conscious of a network of exotic combination of two or more sense impressions. The images of flowers are treated in social and cultural context. Gulmohur blossoms, says the poet, are so lovely in their hue that neither the 'glimmering red of the bridal rose', nor the 'limpid clouds of lustrous dawn', nor even the 'rapturous light/From a true wife's funeral pyre' – be rival for them. Similarly, the cassias are the fragments of some new fallen stars/Or gold lamps for a fairy shrine/Or golden pitchers for fairy wine/Or bright anklet bells from the wild spring's feet ("The Golden Cassia" p96). The champak blossoms are likened to 'amber petals', 'ivory petals', 'petals of carven jade' ("Champak Blossoms" p97). The lily in the poetry of Sarojini Naidu is symbolic of virginity and purity. She talks of the fingers and feet of the virgin as 'lily like'. The lotus flower has mythical and national significance for her. It is associated with the legend of Lakshman, lotus-born; Sarasvati, lotus-seated; and Buddha, lotus-throned. In "To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus" (p61) the poet contrasts the peace and tranquillity of the lotus to the travail, the heat and the unrest of her times. The Nirvana of Buddha's lotus throne is not subject to decay. The symbolism of the lotus image is expressed more effectively in "The Lotus" (p167) – a poem addressed to Mahatma Gandhi, who is compared to the sacred flower in 'myriad – petalled grace' that is inviolable. This lotus (Gandhi Ji) is deeply rooted in the waters of all times – unaffected.

Besides flowers, birds of all sorts like kingfishers, koels, peacocks, pigeons, nightingales and bulbuls flutter through her lines. Precious stones of all types are there in Sarojini Naidu's nature poems. The images of heavenly bodies figure prominently in Sarojini Naidu's poetry with an Indianised effect. The earth is hailed as Prithvi, the sun as Surya and the rain as Varuna. A widely quoted image of the moon occurs in "Leile".

A caste-mark on the azure brow of Heaven

The golden moon burns sacred, solemn, bright

(*The Golden Threshold* p31)

The metaphor emanates from the caste system of her own religion. This typical Indian image of the moon illustrates Sarojini's genius, novelty and originality. James Cousins calls it a 'unique achievement of the imagination in English poetry'. He adds that it 'lifts India to the literary heaven, it threatens the throne of the Diana of the classics; it releases Luna from the work of asylum-keeper...' (quoted in *Sarojini Naidu: An Introduction to Her Life, Work and Poetry* by V. S. Naravana p111). The approach of night in "Leile" – (an Arabic word meaning night) – is suggested with the help of concrete images – like the serpents fallen asleep among the poppies which have association with sleep and dream, the fireflies that can be seen only in the darkness, lotus buds stirring upon the stream like dreaming maidens. The tranquillity of the night is suggested rather than stated. The night is personified in the 2nd stanza of the poem; she is enshrined in the forest temple. The moon shines like a caste mark on the brow of the heaven. The winds dance as the maidens do in the temple, and swoon at the holy feet of the night; and in the silence mystic voices sing and offer incense to the gods. This poem may be compared to William Wordsworth's "Evening":

The Holy time is quite as a Nun

Breathless with adoration.

Sarojini Naidu's poems reveal a spontaneous understanding and acceptance of an Indian point of view on the question of man's relationship with nature. To her there is a complete harmony between human life and that of nature. 'The Corn-Grinders' from "Folk Songs" in *The Golden Threshold* presents a complete unanimity of life. The life of a mouse is same as that of a deer or man. In each stanza of the poem a female mourns the death of a mate in a typical Indian way. The newly married wife at the death of her husband feels that soul burns with the quenchless fire that lit her lovers funeral pyre. In another poem "The HussainSaagar" the poet finds a close relationship between her soul and that of the lake:

Thou dost, like me, to one allegiance hold,

O lake, O living image of my soul (p120)

Or between herself and autumn in "Autumn Song":

My heart is weary and sad and alone

For its dreams like the fluttering have gone (p23)

Throughout Sarojini Naidu's poetry spring is the predominant metaphor. Her soul goes into rapture at the sight of spring's elegance. Much of the invincible rhetoric of her poetry is reserved for the delineation of the beauty of the season. Her ardent preference for the spring evinces her faith in the rejuvenating power of nature. She paints a typical Indian vernal scene:

Young leaves grow green on the banyan twigs

And red on the peepal tree

(‘Spring’, ‘‘Song of Springtime’’, *The Bird of Time* p87)

In Sarojini’s poetry there is a complete harmony between man, nature and myth. She alludes mythical imagery here and there in poems steeped in nature imagery. In poem ‘A Song in Spring’ from ‘‘Songs of Springtime’’, a mythical image is alluded to. In spring wild bees are set afire awhile from the love-god’s string. Spring in ‘In a Time of Flowers’ is suggestively conceived of as a charming woman who allures people by her magic flute, and the earth is compared to a tree that ‘breaks into passionate bloom at the kiss of her fleet gay foot’. These verses have a throwback to a

legend where a tree leaned against or touched by a foot of a tree-divinity will yield flowers.

III. CONCLUSION

Sarojini Naidu was the last of the romantics in Indian English poetry and she was unaffected by the modernist revolution in the west produced by Ezra Pound, Yeats and Eliot. Her nature poetry is not just a faded echo of feeble voice of decadent romanticism but an authentic Indian English lyric utterance exquisitely tuned to the composite Indian ethos. As a poet of nature she responds emotionally rather than intellectually to the sense impressions from nature. In her love of nature she has nothing of the mysticism of Tagore or Wordsworth. Her nature poetry reminds us of Keats, Tennyson and The Pre-Raphaelites.

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