

The Poetry and Politics of Sarojini Naidu

*Syed Munir Wasti **

Sarojini Naidu [1879-1949] belonged to a distinguished Bengali family which had settled in Hyderabad Deccan [South India]. In 1875, her father, Dr Aghorenath Chattopadhyay, became the first Indian to receive a Ph.D. from Edinburgh University [in Chemistry]. On his return to India, he was associated with the Nizam's College [that later formed the nucleus of Osmania University]. As the predominant culture of Hyderabad was Islamic, his children, who were born and brought up in Hyderabad, imbibed and assimilated it effortlessly into their individual personalities. Dr. Aghorenath had a most catholic and cosmopolitan outlook on life which he passed on to his children rejecting the narrow, caste-ridden world-view of Hinduism. He well appreciated the rich cultural heritage of the Muslims and wrote verse in Urdu.¹ So the young and talented Sarojini grew up in an environment most congenial to the composition of verse – for which she chose English rather than any Indian language, as it was emerging as a universal *lingua franca*. In this, she was also following the path of another talented Bengali poetess, Toru Dutt [1856-1877] who also wrote simple and attractive verses in English during her brief life.² Sarojini's life in Hyderabad was marked by her exposure to the religious and socio-cultural milieu that existed there in 'the days of the beloved', Mir Mahbub Ali Khan, Nizam VI ['Mahbub' = 'beloved'].

Sarojini Naidu began composing English verse at the age of 13. She spent the years 1895-98 in England studying at Girton College, Cambridge.³ She came into contact with leading literary figures such as Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse. She contributed

* *Professor Department of English, University of Karachi, Karachi.*

her poems to literary journals during her stay and later [in 1905, 1912 and 1917] had her collections of verse published in Britain. Thus by 1905, Sarojini had accumulated a sufficient body of verse to be printed in book-form. This was done in 1905 with an introduction by Edmund Gosse. The book was entitled *The Golden Threshold* – which was the name of her house in Hyderabad. Gosse praised her versifying abilities thus

I do not think that any one questions the supreme place she holds among those Indians who write in our tongue... She is the most brilliant, the most original, as well as the most correct of all the natives of Hindustan who have written in English.⁴

This tribute, from a distinguished poet and critic, brings out the exceptional poetic craftsmanship that Sarojini possessed. She received favourable reviews from English journals as well.

When in 1912 her second collection of verse, *The Bird of Time*, appeared, she had established her position in the poetry-reading public. In another introduction, Edmund Gosse now stated that Sarojini needed no introduction as her fame had spread far and wide. Gosse wrote:

If the poems of Sarojini Naidu be carefully and delicately studied, they will be found as luminous in lighting the dark places of the East as any contribution of savant or historian.⁵

The points raised by Gosse were taken further in a review of her book that appeared in the *Yorkshire Post* which stated:

Mrs. Naidu has...enabled us to grow into intimate relation with the spirit, the emotions, the mysticism and the glamour of the east.⁶

The title of the book was taken from the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam [in Edward FitzGerald's version]:

The Bird of Time has but a little way
To flutter- and lo! The bird is on the wing.⁷

As early as 1906, Sarojini Naidu had recorded her appreciation of Omar Khayyam thus:

Many of you ... are acquainted with that great Persian poet and astronomer, Omar Khayyam, whose beautiful poetry is equally the wonder and delight of East and West.⁸

Mrs. Naidu, in spite of herself, was getting more and more involved in politics – whether to champion the rights of the untouchables or to promote Hindu-Muslim unity.

Sarojini's third book, *The Broken Wing*, appeared in 1917. She was more mature now both poetically as well as personally and this maturity was reflected in her poems as well. Her growing involvement in politics is shown by her attending the joint sessions of the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League held in Lucknow in 1916 that resulted in the Lucknow Pact between the two political parties. In this book, she dedicates her poem *Awake* to the young Mahomed Ali Jinnah in the futile hope that Muslims would be treated as equals by the Hindus. This poem was read out by her at the joint session. Soon afterwards, she wrote a 'biographical appreciation' of the Quaid-e-Azam prefacing this to a collection of his speeches and writing [1912-17]. This book has a foreword by the Raja of Mahmudabad. In a brief note at the beginning, Sarojini Naidu writes:

This brief biographical study...claims to be no more than a hasty and imperfect sketch of a remarkable personality, meant to take its place in that little national portrait gallery of distinguished men.⁹

Her 'biographical appreciation' covers some 20 pages and displays Sarojini Naidu's exceptional knowledge of Mr Jinnah's early life and later career. Her pen-picture of Mr Jinnah is remarkable both for its accuracy and its insight:

Tall and stately, but thin to the point of emaciation, languid and luxurious of habit, Mahomed Ali Jinnah's attenuated form is the deceptive sheath of a spirit of exceptional vitality and endurance...Pre-eminently rational and practical, discreet and

dispassionate in his estimate and acceptance of life, the obvious sanity and serenity of his worldly wisdom effectually disguise a shy and splendid idealism which is the very essence of the man¹⁰

According to Padmini Sengupta, Sarojini Naidu never stopped regarding Mr Jinnah as a great son of India even when he had demanded Pakistan.¹¹ She was angry at the exclusion of Jinnah from a book by her (Sengupta) on great Indian leaders saying: ‘But Jinnah is a great man. You should have included him in your book.’¹²

In 1920, while on a visit to England, Sarojini Naidu spoke vociferously in support of the stand taken by the Khilafat delegation then visiting England [led by Maulana Muhammad Ali] to explain the sentiments of Indian Muslims to Lloyd George.¹³

Sarojini Naidu worked hard for the emancipation of women from the ‘steel frame’ of the Hindu caste system. In 1928, she left for the U.S. to muster support for them. During her absence in America, a friend of hers over many years – though much younger – the beautiful Ruttie Jinnah died at the age of 29 in Bombay [29 February 1929]. News reached Sarojini Naidu with some delay and she wrote a message of condolence to Kanji Dwarkadas who had tended Ruttie during her last illness. She wrote with true feeling:

I seem to be stricken dumb suddenly and all my strength has deserted me. The earth has been heavy over the beautiful face I loved for a month...Poor child, poor wonderful stricken child...Ruttie was very close to my heart.¹⁴

Sarojini attended three round table conferences in U.K in the early 1930s. She was arrested during the anti-Harijan campaign when the British decided to clamp down on it. After her release, she went to Allahabad, being received by the famous vice-chancellor of Allahabad University, Dr. Amarnath Jha, and attended recitals of Urdu and Persian poetry.

During the ‘Quit India’ movement, Sarojini’s activities resulted in her incarceration. But her sense of humour carried her through all her tribulations. A memorable account of this is given in

the very readable report included in the well-known book *Verdict on India* by Beverley Nichols.¹⁵

Events moved inexorably forward culminating in the independence of Pakistan and India in August 1947. Sarojini Naidu was appointed Governor of the important province of Uttar Pradesh where she dealt with the overwhelming problem of communal violence in her non-partisan way. Performing her duties, she died in office on 2 March 1949. Her old friend and fellow-Hyderabad, Nawab Sir Nizam Jung Bahadur, penned these lines on her departure:

Spirit ever ardent, ever true!
Aloft you've flown bright visions to pursue
Righteous amidst the fierce turmoil of life,
Opposed to wrong, allaying hurtful strife...¹⁶

Sarojini Naidu had earlier paid her tribute to Sir Nizam Jung when she wrote the introduction to his biography [by Zahir Ahmed].¹⁷ The two fellow-poets, friends and fellow-Hyderabadis valued each other's friendship over all other considerations.

Sarojini Naidu's three collections of verse referred to above i.e.

The Golden Threshold, 1905

The Bird of Time, 1912

The Broken Wing, 1917

have been collected in a single volume entitled *The Sceptred Lute* [Allahabad, 1943]. Within this collection, there are several sections and sub-sections containing a number of poems under a separate rubric. The poems reflect the 'short and simple annals' of the Indian folk but also touch ceremonial, religious, and socio-cultural matters.

In the first section [entitled *Folk Songs*], there are 12 poems dealing with people like singers, weavers, grinders, harvesters and snake-charmers – the kind of folk no village in India in the late 19th century was without. The last poem of this section is titled *Suttee* [lit. a widow, but generally a widow who is going to be burned to death on the funeral pyre of her husband]:

Lamp of my life, the lips of death
Hath blown thee out with sudden breath;
Naught shall revive thy vanished spark...
Love, must I dwell in the living dark?

The second section [6 poems] is titled *Songs for Music* intended to be sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments. There is a translation from Urdu, *Humayun to Zobeida*, which shows her familiarity with Urdu romances. Her poem, *Alabaster*, is as exquisitely chiseled as its title:

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.

The third section [22 poems] begins with an ode to Mir Osman Ali Khan, Nizam VII, presented at the Ramazan durbar. She addresses him thus:

The votaries of the Prophet's faith,
Of whom you are the crown and chief

And prays thus:

God give you joy, God give you grace
To shield the truth and smite the wrong...

The references to "Prophet's votaries", "fables of Baghdad", "the Thousand Nights", "saki singers" and "sufi wine" in the poem indicate, as K.V. Suryanarayana Murti writes, 'the impact of Muslim culture and Islamic literature on her poetry.'¹⁸

A versified translation of a poem from the Persian of Princess Zeb-un-nissa [daughter of Emperor Aureng-Zebe] in praise of her own beauty is given with lovely lexical effect. This poem is a paraphrase of some extempore verses composed by Zeb-un-nissa when she was thus addressed by an admirer:

1. tu-raa ay mahjabee(n) bi-purda deedan aarzu daar-am
2. jamaal-at haa-i husn-at raa raseedan aarzu daar-am

Translation:

1. You, O moon-faced, I wish to see unveiled
2. The brilliance of your beauty be within my reach – thus I wish.

In answer, the Princess gave this poetic response:

1. bulbul az gul bi-guzarad gar dar chaman beenad ma-raa
2. but parasti ke kunad gar barhaman beenad ma-raa
3. dar sukhan pin-haa(n) sha-wam chu bu-e gul dar barg-e gul
4. har keh deedan mayl daarad dar sukhan beenad ma-raa

Translation:

1. The bulbul will ignore the rose in the garden if it sees me –
2. The Brahmin will give up the idol worship if he sees me
3. I am hidden in my verses like the scent of the rose in the rose petal –
4. Who so wishes to approach me should read my verses.

Sarojini Naidu puts it in this way:

When from my cheek I lift my veil,
The roses turn with envy pale,
And from their pierced hearts, rich with pain,
Send forth their fragrance like a wail.

Or if perchance one perfumed tress
Be loosened to the wind's caress,
The honeyed hyacinths complain,
And languish in a sweet distress

Sarojini Naidu was familiar with the poetic conceits present in Persian and transposed them so skillfully into English garb.¹⁹

A quartet of poems addressed to her four children aged 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively expresses deep maternal affection for them.

Sarojini's attachment to her native Hyderabad is seen in her wonderfully descriptive poem, *Nightfall in the city of Hyderabad* that preserves a way of life that has long passed away:

See how the speckled sky burns like a pigeon's throat,
Jewelled with embers of opal and peridote.

According to K. V. Suryanarayana Murli, "Hyderabad was to Sarojini what Byzantium was to W. B. Yeats."²⁰ The 'trellised balconies', the 'veiled faces', the 'leisurely elephants' are no more but their memories are crystallized in the poet's consciousness. It is a terrible irony that this glorious city was brutally occupied by the Indian military in her lifetime thus sealing its fate and ending forever its rich, cultural way of life.

Sarojini Naidu's poem, *The Royal Tombs of Golconda*, again evokes a sense of longing to probe the veil of mystery surrounding the dear, dead and departed beauties that adorned the royal thrones:

O Queens, in vain old Fate decreed
Your flower-like bodies to the tomb;
Death is in truth the vital seed
Of your imperishable bloom.

The next section is titled *Songs of Love and Death* [12 poems] and reflects a somber and serious mood. There are poems in remembrance of her dead friends and of her feelings of loneliness after their death. *A Persian Love Song* reflects the romantic notion that lovers closely cross-identify with each other for the reason that

Perchance, that I am you,
Dear love, that you are I!

This is a traditional Persian concept as we can see expressed in this verse of Amir Khusrau:

Man tu shud-am, tu man shudi
Man tan shud-am, tu jaa(n) shudi
Taa kas na goyad ba'd azi(n)

Man digar-am tu digar-ee...

Translation:

I am you, you are me
I am the body, you are the soul –
So that no one may say after this
That I am different and you are different!

In Arabic, this concept is taken still further:

Ana man ahwa wa man ahwa ana
Nahnu ruhaan talabna badana...

Translation:

I am he who I love and he who I love is I!
We are two souls seeking one body!

Sarojini Naidu's attachment to the Persian poetry of Amir Khusrau is mentioned by her thus:

The first accents I heard were in the tongue of Amir Khosro. All my early associations were formed with the Mussulman men and Mussulman women of my city [Hyderabad Deccan].²¹

Songs of the Springtime [10 poems] are filled with hope, light, cheer and optimism. A subcontinental atmosphere is created and sustained by such poems as *Vasant Panchami* [a festival of lamps], *In Praise of Gulmohar Blossoms* and *Champak Blossoms*.

Indian Folk Songs [eight poems] contains a section *Songs of my city* [Hyderabad] which gives true-to-life vignettes of a Hyderabad that is no more [q.v]. *In a latticed balcony*, *In the bazaars of Hyderabad*, *Bangle sellers* evoke scenes of a colorful and vibrant civilization for example, the itinerant peddlers sing:

What do you sell, O ye merchants?
Richly your wares are displayed.
Turbans of crimson and silver,
Tunics of purple brocade,
Mirrors with panels of amber,
Daggers with handles of jade.

Songs of Life [16 poems] is a section that is both introspective and extrospective. The *Hussein Saagar* [a famous lake in Hyderabad] becomes more than a lake:

Thou dost, like me, to one allegiance hold,
O lake, O living image of my soul.

The Faery Isle Of Janjira is an address to its talented ruler Nazli Raffia:

Fain would I dwell in your faery kingdom,
O faery queen of a flowering clime...

The Old Woman is a sympathetic picture of an old beggar woman to whom nobody pays heed:

Tho' the world may not tarry to help her or heed,
More clear than the cry of her sorrow and need
Is the faith that doth solace her breast:

“*Lailaha illa-l-Allah,
La ilaha illa-l-Allah,
Muhammad-ar-Rasul-Allah.*”

The Call for Evening Prayer begins with the *adhaan* as proclaimed from the mosques of Hyderabad thus:

Allah ho Akbar! Allah ho Akbar!
From mosque and minar the *muezzins* are calling;
Pour forth your praises, O Chosen of Islam;
Swiftly the shadows of sunset are falling:
Allah ho Akbar! Allah ho Akbar!

This is followed by church bells [for Christians, recitation of the Avesta by Zoroastrians] and chanting by Hindus. It shows a mosaic of faiths peacefully co-existing under a benign Muslim ruler. Sarojini Naidu was a true admirer of the religion of Islam and had the insight to appreciate its many qualities in the area of politics. In

an address at Patna on 13 October 1917, she makes this remarkable statement:

The first of the great world religions that 1300 years ago laid down the first fundamental principles of democracy was the religion of Islam. In the West, they speak of it as if it was a thing newborn, the discovery of the western people, but the first secret of this great worldwide democracy was laid in the desert sands of Arabia ... I say the Hindu community by itself cannot evolve it because, Hindu as I am, I stand here to confess the limitation of my community. We have not mastered that fundamental equality that is the privilege of Islam.²²

Songs of Life and Death [23 poems] are both personal and political while being picturesque at the same time.

The Gift of India is an elegy on the unknown Indian dead who fell fighting for the British in World War One ‘on the blood-brown meadows of Flanders and France.’

The Imam Bara [of Lucknow] is a description of the lamentations that take place there during the mourning month of Muharram.

A Song from Shiraz is an address to Mohammad Ali, a pseudo-prophet who claimed to be a revolutionary.

Imperial Delhi describes the glorious past of regal city whose permanence transcends the rule of different dynasties.

Memorial Verses are addressed to Mir Mehbub Ali Khan and titled *Ya Mehbub* [‘O beloved’]. She praises him thus:

O hands that succoured a people’s need
With the splendour of Haroun-al-Rasheed!
O heart that solaced a sad world’s cry
With the sumptuous bounty of Hatim Tai!
Where are the days that were winged and clad
In the fabulous glamour of old Baghdad.

Her easy familiarity with the historical and literary traditions of the Muslims is apparent. Then there are elegies on Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyay [her father]. She remembers the latter thus:

Farewell great spirit, without fear or flaw,
Thy life was love and liberty thy law,
And Truth thy pure imperishable goal...

Wandering Beggars is a poem on a sight familiar in India:

From the threshold of the Dawn
On we wander, always on
Till the friendly light be gone
Y' Allah! Y' Allah!

The Prayer of Islam interweaves within its texture some of the 99 names of Allah used by Muslims in their remembrance of Divinity. There are 10 names used in the poem. The poem concludes thus:

We are the shadows of Thy light,
We are secrets of Thy might,
The visions of Thy primal dream,
Ya Rahman! Ya Raheem!

In contrast to this tender and tranquil poem, there is the feeling of terror and awe in her poem, *Kali the Mother*:

O terrible and tender and divine!
O mystic mother of all sacrifice,
We deck the somber altars of thy shrine
With sacred basil leaves and saffron rice...

This section concludes with her poem *Awake* dedicated to Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah [q.v.].

The Flowering Year [6 poems] is full of vigour and zest for life in poems like *The Call of Spring*, *The Coming of Spring*, *The Magic of Spring*, *Summer Woods*, *June Sunset* and *The Time of Roses*. Her exquisite lines:

Hide me in a shrine of roses

Drown me in a wine of roses...

Bind me on a pyre of roses
Burn me in a fire of roses...
speak of her intoxication with the beauty of roses.

The Peacock Lute [8 poems] are ‘songs for music’ meant to be sung. The poetess is still occupied with flowers in poems like *Ashoka Blossom*, *Caprice* and *Destiny*. These short lyrics are a verbal riot of color and also have a strong acoustical appeal.

The last section, *The Temple: a pilgrimage of love* has a three-fold division:

- a. The Gate of Delight [8 poems]
- b. The Path of Tears [8 poems]
- c. The Sanctuary [8 poems].

This three-fold structure is synonymous with the structure of a temple with its gate opening into a courtyard, then a path leading inside and then the sanctuary where the idol is seated. It is a pilgrim’s progress in a Hindu context. For an offering to the idol, she offers herself:

Take my flesh to feed your dogs if you choose,
Water your garden-trees with my blood if you will,
Turn my heart into ashes, my dreams into dust-
Am I not yours, O love, to cherish or kill?

The poetry of Sarojini Naidu is multi-faceted and multi-shaded in colours of varying depth and boldness. Her poetic panorama ranges across Bengali-Hyderabad-Muslim-Hindu-English milieus in an amazing sweep covering a vast geographic, historical and linguistic canvas with great ease. In her poetry and her politics, Sarojini Naidu reflected an enlightened cosmopolitan attitude that respected the creeds and opinions of others. Of all the political leaders of India, she was the most non-controversial and most universally admired. There is no doubt that a strong element of her poetic and personal psyche was derived from the truly Indo-Persian culture of Hyderabad and her attraction to the simple creed of Islam. Her admiration for the Quaid-e-Azam is more marked than any she had for other Indian leaders. Her highlighting

democracy and equality as endemic to, and inseparable from, Islam, is brought out more emphatically in her lecture to Madras Muslims on the 'ideals of Islam':

Brotherhood is the fundamental doctrine that Islam taught ... Sense of justice is one of the most wonderful ideals of Islam ... It was the first religion that preached and practised democracy ... the democracy of Islam is embodied five times a day when the peasant and the king kneel side by side and proclaim, 'God alone is great.' I am struck over and over again by this indivisible unity of Islam that makes a man instinctively a brother ... Dr. Iqbal has done immense service that can never be recognized adequately."²³

Praise for Sarojini Naidu's poetic expertise came readily from Edmund Gosse [q.v.], Aldous Huxley²⁴ and others. Her fellow-Indians were also lavish in her praise as is evident from the statements of Mrs. Vijaya Luxmi Pandit²⁵, Dr. Rajendra Prasad²⁶ and Dr. Radhkrishnan.²⁷ Her old friend and admirer, Professor Amarnath Jha, had issued a critical appreciation of her poetry on her birthday [13 February] in 1949. This brings out, through the eyes of this famous critic of English literature, the multi-dimensional merits of her poetic corpus.²⁸ One of her admirers even presented Sarojini Naidu in a work of fiction dealing with Hyderabad Deccan.²⁹ In less than a month, when she died on 2 March 1949, she was universally mourned. The voice of the 'Nightingale of India' [*bulbul-i-Hind*] was eternally stilled.

NOTES:

1. For Dr. Aghorenath, see P. C. Roy, *Life and Experiences of a Bengali Chemist*, Calcutta: Chuckerverity Chatterjee & Co., 1932. See also Padmini Sengupta, *Sarojini Naidu: a biography*, London: Asia Publishing House, 1966, p. 10
2. Padmini Sengupta, *Toru Dutt*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997
3. Sengupta, *op. cit.*, p. 28
4. *ibid.*, p. 53
5. *ibid.*, p. 75
6. Edward FitzGerald, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, London: The Richards Press, n.d., p. 9

7. V. Grover & R. Arora [eds.], *Sarojini Naidu*, New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 1993, p. 175
8. Sengupta, *op. cit.*, p. 76
9. Sarojini Naidu, *Mahomad Ali Jinnah: an ambassador of unity*, Madras: Ganesh and Co., 1918, p. ix
10. *ibid.*, p. 2
11. Sengupta, *op. cit.*, p. 133
12. *ibid.*, p. 133
13. *ibid.*, p. 160
14. Kanji Dwarkadas, *Ruttie Jinnah: the story of a great friendship*, self-published, Bombay, n.d, pp. 61-62
15. Beverley Nichols, *Verdict on India*, Lahore: Book Traders, n.d., pp. 148-156
16. Nizamat Jung, *Poems*, Hyderabad, n.d., p. 419
17. Zahir Ahmad, *Life's Yesterdays: a biography of Nawab Sir Nizamat Jung*, Calcutta: 1945
18. K.V. Suryanarayana Murti in *Hyderabad in the Poetry of Sarojini Naidu in Kohinoor in the Crown: Critical Studies in Indian English Literature*, Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1987, p. 49
19. The story has been recounted in the introduction to the *Diwan of Zeb-un-Nisa* by Magan Lal & Jessie Duncan Westbrook, London: John Murray, 1913, pp. 12-13. The Persian lines, being extempore, do not appear in her *divan* but the text is given in *Sawanih Zeb-un-nisa Begum*, Agra: Abul 'Alai Books, 1920, p. 30. This book is by the famous Urdu poet, Seemab Akbarabadi.
20. Murti, *op. cit.*, p. 53
21. V. Grover & R. Arora, *op. cit.*, p. 51
22. *ibid.*, p. 110
23. *ibid.*, pp. 53-54
24. Aldous Huxley, *Jesting Pilate*, New York: Modern Library, 1945, p. 7
25. Vijaya Laxmi Pandit, *The Scope of Happiness*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1988, p. 145
26. Rajendra Prasad, *Autobiography*, Bombay Asia Publishing House, 1990, p. 440
27. Sengupta, *ibid.*, p. 339
28. Included in *Sarojini Naidu: a personal homage*, Allahabad: Indian Press, 1949, pp. 67-76. I am profoundly grateful to Prof. Dr. Hetukar Jha, retired Professor of Sociology, Patna University, India, for sending me this invaluable memoir by his kinsman .
30. Zeenuth Futehally, *Zohra*, Bombay: Hind Kitabs, 1951.

Abstract

Sarojini Naidu [1879-1949] was a remarkable lady who not only composed poetry in English but also fully participated in the freedom struggle of South Asia. These dual aspects have been focussed on in this essay. Her broadmindedness, her vision, her familiarity with Muslim culture and her attachment to the impressive personality of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah are other interesting aspects of her multi-faceted personality. An examination of her poetic merits and the various influences on her poetry and of the contemporary political scene has brought to light her rich and rounded personality.