

THE POETRY OF SAROJINI NAIDU: AN EXPRESSION OF ARTISTRY

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ABSTRACT

Sarojini Naidu was one of the renowned women poets of Indo Anglian Literature. She contributed remarkably in the arena of Indian poetry in English. Her first volume of poetry *The Golden Threshold* appeared in 1905 which made her famous at once as a poet of refined poetic sensibility. Her subsequent volumes of poems also made a mark and dealt with varied themes as nature, folk life, patriotism, mysticism, love and death. Sarojini Naidu's poems reflect her art of writing poetry which is marked by her originality of thoughts and spontaneity of expression. The present paper focuses on some of the prominent poetic devices employed by Sarojini Naidu which lent artistic hue to her poetry.

KEYWORDS: Rhetorical Stylistic Device, Alliteration, Refrain, Vernacular Words, Metaphors, Similes

INTRODUCTION

Sarojini Naidu was amongst the pioneer poets of Indo-Anglian literature. She began writing poetry in the last decade of the nineteenth century but was highly influenced by the Romantic poets due to her intense reading of Romantic poetry. She started writing at the time when sonnets, ode and lyrics, having emphasis on colour, imagery, feelings and imagination were in vogue and she was highly influenced by such writings. She studied ornate poetry which made impact on her writings. Her close associations with Rhymer's club during her stay in England lent verbal classiness, musical texture and metrical discipline to her poetry. It has been aptly commented about the striking features of her style:

Sarojini Naidu writes instant poetry where images and metaphors come rolling ready on the hot plates of imagination. Her poetry is intensely emotional, at times passionate to the point of eroticism and always a spring – like lyricism. In her can be perceived the influence of the British romantic poets, but what makes it interesting and relevant to the Indian tradition is the sustenance from the twin indigenous sources. (Prasad and Singh 22)

Sarojini Naidu was a gifted artist having ornamental and highly sophisticated style. Her poetry reflected that she was a superb artist in the use of words. It contained the language, which burnt with feeling and passion and was as sweet as a bird's song. Sarojini Naidu was amongst the pioneers who began her work in the last decade of the nineteenth century and learnt much from the Romantic poets.

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DISCUSSIONS

Sarojini Naidu was a gifted artist having ornamental and highly sophisticated style. Her poetry reflected that she was a superb artist in the use of words. It contained the language, which burnt with feeling and passion and was as sweet as a bird's song. Her genius like that of Shelley and Keats was essentially lyrical. She had the classicist's perfection and refinement and the sensuousness and imagination of the Romantics. She was a conscientious artist and believed in communicating her thoughts in a language that was appealing and graceful. In striving to do so she acquired almost a distinctive style which was her own. Sri Aurobindo aptly remarked that her poetry "has qualities which make her best work exquisite, unique and unmatchable of its kind" (qtd. in Bhushan 52). The poetry of Naidu reflects feminine sensibility with regard to her choice of words, passion and imagery. Armando Menezes remarked rightly:

She had a woman's love of words. They are not, to her, just convenient instruments of expression, they were things: Precious, lovely things, like jewels. She rejoices in Polly syllables that rill and grumble, or rattle like long burnished swords: in phrases like 'lovely stalactite of dreams'; or in 'the long dread, incalculable hour' (46)

It is the harmony of words, the relations of thoughts and rhythm that makes poetry an effective part of literature. Sarojini Naidu was careful regarding the selection of words that lent grace to her poetry and helped her to convey her inner most feelings. We find in her poetry various aspects, relating to the use of words, which she employed to express her thoughts in charismatic tone. She possessed "unfailing verbal felicity and rhythmical dexterity" (Iyengar, IWE 255). She employed the device of alliteration, refrain, vernacular words, metaphors and striking similes to make her language effective, bearing the quality of refinement. Sarojini Naidu employed a polished diction. Her poetry reflects her command over English language. Though she was an Indian, she had mastered the foreign language which came into circulation in India due to colonialism. She had read well the English Romantic poets who influenced her to a great extent. Deobrata Prasad in introduction to his work *Sarojini Naidu and Her Art of Poetry* remarks: "She has a strange love of words. Like Swineburne she is concerned with the meanings of words in a particular way" (xv). The renowned pioneer poets had emphasized on the language of poetry which was the guideline for the ardent poets of each era. About the diction in poetry Horace affirmed:

A good poet will dig up long forgotten treasures of vocabulary and put them into circulation again, brilliantly old fashioned terms which lay hidden in the junk files of neglect. He will be on the alert to take advantage of the newest creations of shifting usage. His utterance will be urgent and clear like the stirring torrent; he will pour out a wealth of words, he will enrich his mother tongue. At the same time, he will cut through stylistic brambles and make smooth and wholesome the paths of meaning; he will be forceful. (qtd. in Wimsatt and Brooks 360)

Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* claimed for language, the highest place among the vehicles of artistic expression, on the ground that it is the most direct and also the most plastic. Further he stressed that language gains a peculiar form in poetry. Naidu was conscious of the importance of language in the world of poetry and therefore she strived to have a sophisticated style by using a language which glowed with fine diction and brilliant figures of speech. Naidu was the

illustrious writer of English verse having refined diction, whose work was admired not only by the great Indian poets like Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo but also by the renowned English critics like Edmond Gosse and Arthur Symons. It has been commented: "Like Keats and Shelley, she employed a high-browed diction, which is steeped in passion, pulse and power. Her sonorous and unusual words add to the subtlety of expression of ideas and display a keen perception of beauty" (Dwivedi 137). While going through Naidu's poetry one realizes that she strived to have a classy style by using various figures of speech. One of the powerful figures of speech employed by Sarojini Naidu was alliteration. Alliteration is a literary or rhetorical stylistic device that allows the repetition of the same sounds using the same consonant sound at the beginning of several words in close succession. The term is sometimes applied in a more general way to the repetition of any sound, whether a vowel (assonance) or a consonant (consonance), in any positions within the words. She employed alliteration using assonance and consonance successfully which provided rhyme and rhythm to her lyrics. In the poem "The Faery Isle of Janjira" included in the fourth volume of her poetry *The Sceptred Flute: Songs of India* (TSF), alliteration is being employed by consonance using the consonant 'f' in line 1 and 2 and consonant 'g' in line 4 of the stanza 1. The chosen words speak of Naidu's refined diction:

Fain would I dwell in your faery kingdom
 O faery queen of a flowering clime,
 Where life glides by to a delicate measure,
 With the glamour and grace of a far-off time. (TSF Line 1-4)

The repetition of a particular consonant in a line at the beginning of significant words enhances the melody and charm of the poem. Similarly by the repetition of vowels in her poems Naidu employed assonance competently. It indicates Sarojini Naidu's art of choosing words skillfully. The following lines from the last stanza of "Indian Dancers" are also fine examples of alliteration. By using assonance and consonance successfully she lent melody to her poem. With the help of onomatopoeic effect and rich use of alliterative diction, she portrayed vividly the rhythm and felicity of accomplished Kathak dancers:

Now silent, now singing and swaying and swinging
 like blossom that bend to the breezes or showers,
 Now wantonly winding, they flash, now they falter,
 and, lingering, languish in radiant choir; (TSF 9-10)

Metaphors and similes are significant figures of speech through which poets express their ideas effectively. They provide apt comparisons and help in conveying the matter impressively. Poetry is, first of all, a communication in which a thought or message is conveyed by the writer to the reader. It is not only an act of creation, but an act of sharing. It is therefore important for the reader that he understands how the poet uses words, how he puts fresh vigor and new meaning into words. The reader's understanding is immeasurably increased if he is familiar with the many techniques or devices of poetry. Some of these are extremely simple; a few are rather elaborate. The simplest and also the most effective poetic device is the use of comparison. It might almost be said that poetry expresses the thoughts of the poet well with the help of two main means of comparing things which are, simile and metaphor. Simile is an explicit comparison whereas metaphor is an implicit comparison. It is actually a condensed simile, for it omits "as" or "like". A metaphor establishes a relationship at once and it leaves more to the imagination. It is a shortcut to the meaning and sets two unlike things side by side to make us see the likeness between them. Sarojini Naidu's poetry is rich in metaphors and similes which are figurative devices of great antiquity. Through her imaginative power and refined usage of vocabulary, she has presented some of the finest metaphors and similes. In her poem "Golden Cassia" Sarojini Naidu described the beauty of the blossoms aptly with the help of fine metaphors. The poetess conveyed that the blossoms looked as if they were,

“Fragments of some new-fallen star; / Or Golden lamps for a fairy shrine / Or golden pitchers for fairy wine” (TSF 4-6). They were the “bright anklet bells from the wild spring’s feet” (TSF 8) or “the gleaming tears that some fair bride shed” (TSF 9). Commenting on these metaphors employed by Sarojini Naidu, S. P. Chaturvedi writes, “Here the metaphors are not quaint but quite natural in the back ground of Indian scene. They convey the poetic sensibility and romantic imagination of the poetess. Every metaphor sharpens into a symbol” (143).

Another apt example of Naidu’s fine metaphors is her Nature lyric “Nasturtiums”. In this lyric she compared the beauty of Nasturtium blossoms with the immortal women of Sanskrit legends who possessed radiant virtues. Such a comparison by Naidu reflects that she was deeply rooted to the Indian culture and to the glorious past of her mother land. She was among the pioneers who showed yearning for the revival of the cultural glory of India through her poetry. She glorified Indian womanhood through this poem. This poem begins with the admiration of the blossoms in the spring season and transports the reader to India’s legendary past by the description of the virtuous women of Puranic Age. It also reflects her sharp feminine sensibility:

POIGNANT and subtle and bitter perfume
Exquisite, luminous, passionate bloom,
Your leaves interwoven of fragrance and fire
Are Savitri’s sorrow and Sita’s desire,
Draupadi’s longing, Damayanti’s fear,
And sweetest Sankuntala’s magical tears. (TSF 1-6)

Naidu’s use of striking similes is one of the unique qualities of her poetry. Her similes succeed in capturing reader’s attention and provide grandeur to her thoughts and expressions. Her similes also bear the stamp of Indianness which lends grace and uniqueness to her poetry. Her lyric “Palanquin Bearers” is one of the refined examples of her use of similes. This lyric is not only known for its meter and rhyme but also for the striking similes. In this lyric the beauty and the delicacy of the bride in the palanquin has been described marvelously through the employment of various similes. The bride sways “like a flower in the wind of our song” (TSF 2); she skims “like a bird on the foam of a stream,” (TSF 3); she floats “like a laugh from the lips of a dream” (TSF 4). She is been carried gently by the palanquin bearers “like a pearl on a string” (TSF 6). In the poem “Bangle Sellers” one comes across apt similes employed by Naidu. She described colourful bangles which are the important objects of ‘sringar’ in the Indian tradition and are worn by Indian women, whether they are maidens or married, by the young and the old. She wrote, “Some are flushed like the buds that dream” (TSF 9), some bangles are “like fields of sunlit corn,” (TSF 13) some “like the flame of her marriage fire” (TSF 15) and some are “Tinkling, luminous, tender, and clear, / Like her bridal laughter and bridal tear” (TSF 17-18). The poetess described different stages of a woman’s life with the description of various colours of bangles by using apt similes.

The poem “Coromandel Fishers” is appreciated for its striking imagery and folk spirit. Naidu personifying wind, created a beautiful visual imagery with the help of a capturing simile when she wrote: “The wind lies asleep in the arms of the dawn like a child that has cried all the night” (TSF 2). The calm of the sea at the dawn is aptly described by the poetess by employing the outstanding simile in which the wind has been portrayed as a child and the dawn is been portrayed as a mother who gives comfort to her child who has cried all night. In the poem “Autumn Song” the poetess painted a beautiful and expressive picture of the sunset through an appropriate simile: “Like a joy on the heart of a sorrow, / The sunset hangs on a cloud;” (TSF 1-2). In “Alabaster” she described that the delicate thoughts of her heart were like the delicate art of an alabaster box. The lyric is a lovely web of fancy. It reflects the superb imagination of the poetess. Although it is a short lyric it conveys the delicacy of expression in a pleasing manner. Naidu wrote skillfully:

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. (TSF 1-4)

Sarojini Naidu sought beauty from the world around her. The perception of beauty by the poet gave rise to the charming thoughts in her mind which found expression in refreshing similes. In the poem “Longing” she expressed her loneliness and struck a note of melancholy. She employed pleasing similes drawn from the world of Nature to describe her inner most thoughts beautifully:

Round the sadness of my days
 Breaks a melody of praise
 Like a shining storm of petals,
 Like a lustrous rain of pearls,
 From the lutes of eager minstrels (TSF 1-5)

Sarojini Naidu also used vernacular words very effectively which provided a charisma and artfulness in the expression of her thoughts and captured beautifully her subtle native passion. Vernacular words not only lend rhyming grace but also lend the feature of Indianness to her poetry. The vernacular words, used in the poem “The Call to Evening Prayer” in *The Bird of Time*, depict effectively the emotional atmosphere of the evening. It is the representation of communal harmony. The muezzin’s call, “Allah ho Akbar! Allah ho Akbar” in line 1 and 2 of stanza 1 beautifully captures the spirit of Islam where as “Naray’ana! Naray’ana!” in line 16 and 20 of stanza 4 expresses the spirit of Hinduism. The words chosen by her are both from the Hindu mythology and Muslim culture and religious background. In “The Old Woman” the words ‘Lailaha ill-I-Allah’ and ‘Muhammad-ar-Rasul-Allah’ lend grace as well as emotional strength to the poem. The portrait of an old Muslim woman becomes lively by Naidu’s usages of Urdu. The poet depicted:

In her weary old age, O dear God, is there none
 To bless her tired eyelids to rest?
 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 ill-I-Allah
 Lailaha ill-I-Allah
 Muhammad-ar-Rasul-Allah.” (TSF 21-28)

With the help of vernacular words Sarojini Naidu successfully employed the instrument of refrain that highlights the presence of musical quality in her poetry. In “Village Songs”, which is from *The Bird of Time*, ‘Ram re Ram!’ reflects the poet’s native sentiments and expresses effectively the passion and fear of a lovely maiden who goes out with a pitcher to the river to fetch water with a hope to meet her lover and gets delayed as she waits for her lover. In “Songs of Radha, the Milkmaid”, included in *The Bird of Time*, the cry of ‘Govinda! Govinda!’ bares the mantric effect and can be felt strongly. It is a fine example of refrain and vernacular usage. Regarding the vernacular usage in Naidu’s poetry Lotika Basu giving her opinion writes: “The artificiality of poems is increased by the repetition of vernacular words which have no meaning and association for the English reader and seem only something fantastic--words, in fact, which even in their native language have no poetic value ...” (94). It is a biased judgment to think that the vernacular words employed by

Naidu have no value. In reality, the vernacular words enclose within them the exact meaning and fit aptly in the context of poem and therefore never appear to be superfluous.

CONCLUSIONS

Sarojini Naidu crafted her art of writing poetry well. The introduction by Arthur Symons in *The Golden Threshold* (TGT) suggests this aspect and acquaints us with the fact that she was persuaded upon for the publication of her poems in *The Golden Threshold*. Arthur Symons wrote: “It is at my persuasion that these poems are now published....As they seemed to me to have an individual beauty of their own, I thought they ought to be published. The writer was hesitated” (TGT 10). The poetess wanted her poetry to be refined pieces before they were published. She was always in search of beauty. She was aware of the high standards of English poetry and was a good critic of her own poetry therefore even after getting the approval of a known English critic like Arthur Symons for publishing her first collection of poems she replied to him in one of her letters:

Is it possible that I have written, verses that are filled with beauty, and is it possible that you really think them worthy of being given to the world? You know how high my ideal of Art is; and to me my poor casual little poems seem to be less than beautiful, I mean with that final enduring beauty that I desire. (introd. TGT 10)

Sarojini Naidu’s style was unique. Though she sought inspiration from the English Romantics, her poetry reveals her individuality and originality. She combined her imagination, feeling and sophisticated diction in an artistic manner which made her poetry glow with life and fire of passion. A. N. Dwivedi remarked aptly: “Sarojini was actually two things in one; a supreme artist and a fine melodist with the background of an intense thinker” (126).

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