

Chapter IX

CONCLUSION

"The Poetry is the reality, no doubt, but the poet too compels attention"¹, said Prof. K.R.S.Iyengar in connection with Toru Dutt. The statement is equally true in the case of Sarojini also, for Mrs. Sarojini Naidu is inseparable from her poetry. Her instinctive passion for Poetry, her womanly sentiment in love, her love of beauty in Nature, her concern with the problems of living and her surging patriotism -- are some of the major aspects of her character and they all find adequate expression in her poems. Poetry came to her as a natural gift and she could not be any other than a poet in an atmosphere that was more poetic than Prosaic. Nurtured by the congenial home atmosphere, dominated by the cultural pursuits of the parents, and her intimate association with the English poets during her stay in England, Sarojini grew to be "a supreme singer of beautiful songs, songs bathed in melody and thought."² Her childhood dream of becoming "a Goethe or a Keats for India"³ was not surely

-
1. K.R.S. Iyengar, 'Indigo Writing in English' (New Delhi : Sterling Publishers, 1987), p.55.
 2. B.S.Mathur, "Sarojini Naidu : A Singer of Beautiful Songs", The Calcutta Review (August, 1949), pp.115-116.
 3. The Birds of Time, p.7.

fulfilled, but she was the first Indo-Anglian poet to have earned wide reputation, both in India and abroad. Her inclusion in The Oxford Book of English Mystic Verse (Oxford, 1917) was a rare honour for an Indian writing in English. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature (Britain), Sarojini built a popular image of poetical worth of English poetry written by Indians. Earlier, a few poets like Manmohan Ghose and Toru Dutt wrote in English and were acclaimed by the press and critics. George Sampson observes in The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature : "Manmohan was the most remarkable of Indian poets who wrote in English".⁴ But his poetry was derivative and imitative and breathed an English air rather than Indian. Although Toru Dutt was derivative and alien in her A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields, her Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan popularised and made public some of the glorious characters of Indian epics and myths. Sarojini carried on this practice of dealing with Indian themes in poetry. In this respect N.Srivastava rightly observes : "In Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu we find a voice representative of Indian life and culture as a whole."⁵ Sarojini made further

4. George Sampson, The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature (Cambridge : C.U.P., KLES ed., 1961), p.914.

5. Dr. N.Srivastava, "Indian Women Poets in English", Indian Literature (Oct.-Dec., 1975), p.63.

improvement upon the earlier Indo-Anglian poets in the sense that her poetry was a development from neo-romanticism to romanticism and mysticism. In her selfless love for Nature, in her response to sensations produced by beauty and love, in her glow of imagination and emotion, in her imagery and mystic flights, she is a true romantic. Like Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, she intensified the phase of Indo-Anglian romanticism and made Indo-Anglian poetry a popular genre in the world literature. Serious Indian poetry in English is being written today, which augurs its bright future in respect of audience and recognition. It is characterised by experimentation and innovation, new imagery and realistic attitude, authentic creative urge and equally superb craftsmanship. Yet it cannot be denied that the modern edifice stands on the solid base laid by the few young poets like Sarojini Naidu of the
Century
nineteenth Renaissance in India. Dr. P.C.Kotoky rightly observes :

"... she has remained for decades the most well-known Indo-English Poet, even to the extent of popular identification of Indo-English poetry with her poetic output alone." 6

6. P.C.Kotoky, Indo-English Poetry (Gauhati University, 1969), p.42.

The critical analysis of the various features of Sarojini's poetry -- her themes, poetic vision, imagery and art in the foregoing chapters -- reveal beyond doubt that she possessed the soul of a true poet and was endowed with a remarkable and powerful poetic sensibility which she exhibited in her exquisite lyrics. She suffers from a low-down of her poetic stature only when 'modernity's' is demanded of her, for which she had no flair. She did not write of the grinding poverty, the squalor and the drab of the industrial life, the social, political and economic exploitation of the rural masses and, above all, the existential agony of a modern man; for

"Poetry was beauty to her -- not mere realistic ugly disgusting and sordid attitudes of life. These might be the realities of existence; but not what inspired Sarojini".⁷

Her love for India was no less strong than that for her Muse and naturally she disliked to highlight her country's darker aspects. Rather, she took delight in presenting her Motherland with all her richness and variety to the Western readers.

Sankar Mokashi-Punekar says :

"Sarojini was the nightingale of India, read or unread -- the symbol of an achievement, at a time when such achievements were badges needed for the Indian mind to establish its pride and identity."⁸

7. Padmini Sengupta, Sarojini Naidu (New Delhi : Sahitya Academy, 1974), p. 78.

8. S. Mokashi-Punekar, "A Note on Sarojini Naidu" in Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English, (Dharwar : Karnatak University, 1968), p. 181.

Sarojini sang of India of Savitri and Sakuntala of Hale and Damayanti, of Radha and Krishna, of Gokhale and Mahatma. There are also palanquin-bearers, fishermen, dancers, bangle-sellers, beggars, snake-charmers and wandering singers. They are not to be dismissed simply as creations of her romantic imagination; they are starkly real and bear the touch of her broad humanity. Her re-creations of Indian myth, legend and folk-lore, and her descriptions of Indian nature with its birds, flowers, trees, etc. and of old cities and bazaars heighten the spirit of Indianness of her poetry. R.P.N.Sinha observes that Sarojini's poems written after the advice of Edmund Gosse "breathe an Indian

"Breathe an Indian air in all its freshness, glory and romanticism. They are mellifluous and catching and disclose a depth of feeling that is rare in the works of most of her contemporary writers of English verse."⁹

With her highly sensitive soul she was ready to receive impressions from all notes and rhythms of Indian life that has been flowing since time immemorial -- the life that is more idealistic than realistic, more spiritualistic than materialistic in its mode and temperament.

9. R.P.N.Sinha, The Birth and Development of Indo-English Verse, (New Delhi : Dev. Publishing House, 1971), p.186.

Sarojini's poetic genius is essentially lyrical and remains so from the beginning to the end. She never attempted long and narrative verse or moved beyond the lyric range to dabble in philosophy and mysticism. The beauty of nature, the colour and variety of Indian life, the romance and pathos of love and life are the major themes she sang of in a sweet and melodious language. She sang like a free bird : "... I sing as birds do and my songs are ephemeral",¹⁰ she once wrote to Arthur Symonds and the latter felt that it was this 'bird-like quality' of her song that "made her poetry valuable".¹¹ Spontaneity and naturalness of expression give her poetry the same 'bird-like quality' and melodic fervour. In this respect Prof. V.N.Bhusen rightly observes :

"Mrs. Sarojini Naidu is almost the first Indo-English singer to have wide reputation both here and abroad. And that is because of two prominent characteristics of her poetry. She is first and foremost a melodist of high order -- using nothing but winged words and making even ordinary words sound musical by placing them in peculiar contexts. Combined with this is the Pure Indian complexion of her poetry."¹²

10. Padma Sengupta, op.cit., p.29.

11. loc.cit.

12. V.N.Bhusen, ed. The Peacock Lute (Bombay : Padma Publications, 1945), p.96.

Her best known nature lyrics are -- Laili, June Sunset,
The Glorious Lily, The Water Hyacinth and the poems describing
spring in all its splendour. The following lines from
The Call of Spring are quite Wordsworthian in tone :

"I know where the ivory lilies unfold
In brooklets half-hidden in sedges,
And the air is aglow with the blossoming gold
Of thickets and hollows and hedges." 13

The impression of the early morning in The Garden Vigil :

"In the deep silence of the garden-bowers,
Only the stealthy zephyr glides and goes,
Rifling with the secret of sirisha flowers,
And to the new-born hours
Bequeathes the subtle anguish of the rose." 14

-- marks the development of thought-through images. Her masterly
handling of the vivid, colourful and sensuous images produced
by apt similes and metaphors and her skilful use of musical
words and phrases make her one of the greatest lyric poets of
Indo-Anglian literature. The lines from Laili--

"O soft ! the lotus-buds upon the stream
Are stirring like sweet maidens when they dream" 15

Or,

"A caste-mark on the azure brows of Heaven,
The golden moon burns sacred, solemn, bright" 16

13. The S.F., p.135.

14. Ibid., p.172.

15. Ibid., p.31.

16. Ibid., p.31.

-- are memorable for their delicately beautiful images. Again, the line -- "The dance of the dew on the wings of a moon-bear"¹⁷ -- surely touches the high water-mark of romantic lyricism and may very well pass for a phrase from Shelley or Keats.

Her love-lyrics, scattered all over the four volumes of her poetry, are equally beautiful. More than the one third of the bulk of her poetry is devoted to the lyrical presentation of the bliss of love and the pathos of separation. Most typical among them are -- Ecstasy, Song of Radha, the Milkmaid, A Persian Love Song, Humayun to Zobeida, A Raipur Love Song, An Indian Love Song, The Flute-player of Brindaban, etc. The Temple : A Pilgrimage of Love is her most extended and elaborate statement as a poet of love. In her love-lyrics, except in those dealing with the Radha-Krishna theme and those in The Temple where her attitude is totally feminine and characterised by a total self-surrender to the object of love, she reaches the heights of lyric passion and reveals the depth and intensity of her love-experience. The ideal of oneness sounded by Humayun to Zobeida strikes the key-note of Sarojini's concept of love :

"What war is this of Thee and Me ? Give o'er
the wanton strife,
You are the heart within my heart, the life
within my life."¹⁸

And, according to her, mutual responsiveness is the best way

17. Ibid., p.88.

18. Ibid., p.22.

towards such merger :

"O Love ! of all treasures that I own,
What gift have I withheld before thy throne?" 19

Above all, her love-lyrics reflect her emotional fervour,
its intensity and poignancy. So do her lyrics on the theme
of life and death. The "thought-worn singer/In life's high
and lonely places",²⁰ learns from God who tells her in

The Soul's Prayer :

"Life is a prism of My light
And Death the shadow of My face".²¹

In Salutation to Eternal Peace strikes a note of challenge which
is quite emotional and forceful :

"Say, shall I heed dull presages of doom,
Or dread the rumoured loneliness and gloom,
The mute and mythic terror of the tomb?"²²

To the God of Pain, The Post to Death, To a Buddha Seated on
a Lotus and Death and Life are some of her best lyrics on the
theme of life and death. Her beautiful lines --

"And all our mortal moments are
A session of the Infinite".²³

19. Ibid., p. 24x 83.

20. Ibid., p. 26.

21. Ibid., p. 123.

22. Ibid., p. 137.

23. Ibid., p. 62.

-- are unique for their mystic appeal. Her folk-lyrics are a veritable portrait-gallery and display the fluctuating tides of joy and sorrow in the life of the common-folk in India. These lyrics, occasionally allegorical and symbolic in treatment as in The Indian Weavers or The Corn-grinders, display colourful pictures of the life of the fishermen, weavers, beggars, street-hawkers, wandering singers and the like. These songs abound in images and are resonant with the music and melody of her well-chosen diction that reproduces the muzzins, prayer-calls, litanies or incantations of Islam. Her patriotic lyrics, such as The Gift of India and The Lotus throb with her surging passion of patriotism; while the former reflects emotional exuberance : The young Indian soldiers in the First World War are strewn like "blossoms mown down by chance/On the blood-brown meadows of Flanders and France",²⁴ the latter is symbolical : Mahatma Gandhi is here the mystic lotus -- "coeval with the Lords of Life and Death".²⁵ Most of her lyrics are short flights of fancy, but they are possessed of an individual charm. They are a product of her fine sensibility and are characterised by spontaneity, warmth and exuberance. They exhibit Sarojini's superb skill in translating delicate poetic vision and intense emotion into beautiful lyrics. Her poetry, in general, is marked by her verbal and technical accomplishment, the mastery of phrase and rhythm, without which she could not have translated her visions and experiences into melodious poetry. Her songs, evidently not 'ephemeral' as she modestly declared, exhibit a perfect fusion of conception and

24. Ibid., p.146.

25. Ibid., p.167.

expression -- the most essential thing required of a good piece of poetry. Prof. Amarnath Jha justly said :

"Her technical skill is high and as word-artist and master of melodious verse, she is among the most brilliant and accomplished of Indian poets".²⁶

Sarojini's poetical activities ended with her active involvement in the National Movement, but she did not cease to be a poet. The lyric woman expressed herself through her memorable speeches on different occasions :

"She is a woman and a Poet....She talks politics but in the words of a poet. There is imagery in the invocation, colour in the clarion call and movement in the message. All this is held together with a natural eloquence that few poets in any part of the world can boast of."²⁷

In fact, all her poetry went into her oratory. Her speeches were full of intense feeling and were lyrical in the beauty of their language and imagery. Thoughts came to her like verses and she wove them into a pattern that bore the inimitable mark of her gifts of poetry :

"Having travelled, having conceived, having hoped, having enlarged my love, having widened my sympathies, having come into contact with different races, different communities, different religions, different civilisations, friends, my vision is clear".²⁸

On another occasion she thundered :

"You talk of Indian womanhood, you talk of the courage and devotion that took Savitri to the very realms of death to win back her husband's soul. Yet to the Savitris of today you deny that power to win back the national life from the depths of death."²⁹

-
26. A.N.Jha, "Introductory Memoir" in Toru Dutt's Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan (Allahabad : Kitabistan, 1941), pp.14-15.
27. D.S.Dhanapala, Eminent Indians (Bombay : Nalanda Publications, 1947), pp.57-58.
28. Izzat Yar Khan, Sarojini Naidu : The Poet (New Delhi : S.Chand & Co., 1983), p.18.
29. Ibid., p.20.

At the Kanpur Congress she said :

"As long as I have life, as long as blood flows through this arm of mine, I shall not leave the cause of freedom. Come, my general ! Come, my soldiers ! I am only a woman, only a poet. But as a woman I give you the weapons of faith and courage and the shield of fortitude. As a poet I fling out the banner of song and sound the bugle call to battle".³⁰

Out of her many such speeches, the few cited here reflect clearly her essentially poetic personality channelised by Destiny to the field of national politics. Like her patriotic verses, namely, To India, The Gift of India, Awake, An Anthem of Hope, The Call to Evening Prayer, Kali, The Mother, The Prayer of Islam, etc. they reveal at the same time her selfless patriotism, her concern for the status of Indian patriotism, her concern for the status of Indian womanhood, her cosmopolitan outlook, her broad humanity, her reverence for all major religions that have met on the Indian soil and her ceaseless effort towards Hindu-Muslim unity. She was closely associated with the women's movement in India. In addition to her active participation in the 'All India Women's Conference', she worked for the 'National Council for Women in India', a branch of the 'International Council for Women'. During her stay in U.S.A. she delivered a series of lectures on the women of India. The titles of these lectures are significant : "The veiled pageant", "Guardians of the Flame", "A Garden Enclosed", "The Sceptre of Service".³¹ Her casual comments on different personalities high or low, display her deep sense of humour : She called Mahatma Gandhi 'Mickey Mouse' and 'our ugly angel'; she once said, "It takes a lot of money to keep the Mahatma poor!" she called Dr. B.C. Roy, the famous physician and the Chief Minister of the then West Bengal a

30. K.K. Mehrotra, "Poetry of Sarojini Naidu", in Essays and Studies (Allahabad University, 1970), p. 77.

31. V.S. Naravane, Sarojini Naidu (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1980), p. 97.

'Megaphone' for his loud, booming voice; she described Katherine Mayo, the author of the notorious book, Mother India 'a sewer inspectress', she did not even spare herself to cut jokes on.³² She once read out from one of her letters before Prof. Amarnath Jha :

"Of all things that life or perhaps my temperament has given me, I prize the gift of laughter as beyond price".
"Yes", she continued, "don't I laugh even at myself?"³³

It has been noted earlier that Sarojini's active poetic career came to a halt soon after the publication of her third volume of poems, The Broken Wing in 1915, but she did not cease to be a poet, nor did she abandon writing verses decisively after that year; for the poems included in the last volume, The Feather of the Dawn, published in 1961, were written in July-August, 1927.³⁴ The first poem of this volume, In Gokhale's Garden was written at Poona in July, 1927.³⁵ It is evident, therefore, that since 1915 Sarojini's poetic creativity was not totally paralysed, although it was on the wane. This slender volume contains some of her beautiful lyrics like A Persian Lute Song, On Juhu Sands, Mimicry and Songs of Radha.

32. Ibid., pp.149-150.

33. Padmini Sengupta, op.cit., p.66.

34. Issat Yar Khan, op.cit., p.225.

35. Ibid., p.226.

If her involvement in national politics were a force to tether her pursuit of poetry, she would cease to be a poet after the publication of The Golden Threshold in 1905. Because, her initiation into national politics dates as far back as 1902 when she met Gopal Krishna Gokhale and was urged by him to dedicate her life to the service of the country.³⁶ Politics could not gag her lyric voice, nor could it mar the beauty of her verses. In 1903, she delivered a number of lectures and the subject of one such lecture before the students of Pachaiyappa College, Madras, was 'True Brotherhood'.³⁷ She urged upon the students to overcome narrow differences and forge national ~~at~~ unity. In 1904 she attended the Bombay Congress and since then she remained in close contact with the activities of the Congress and its leaders. It is during these years that she brought out 'The Bird of Time and The Broken Wing. The fire of her lyrical genius had ~~not~~ in no way diminished and she presented her readers some of the finest lyrics of Indo-Anglian poetry. In spite of her involvement in the turbulence of national freedom movement and her keen awareness of the social and religious evils, her verses did not lack the lustre of lyric or degenerate into mere propeganda. Rather, her poems on Hindu and Muslim religions are charged with intense passion and sentiment. Her patriotic poems like To India, Awake and The Call to Evening Prayer are superb

36. V.S.Narevane, op.cit., p.21.

37. Ibid., p.20.

in their lyrical appeal and at the same time foster the spirit of nationalism among people of all religions. The poem Awake was dedicated to Mohammad Ali Jinnah in recognition of his efforts to rouse nationalism among the Muslims. Sarojini was born in a Hindu Brahmin family and naturally she had love for her own religion, which she displayed in a number of her verses; but she loved Muslim culture and religion no less. In her own words :

"All my early associations were formed with the Mussalman men and Mussalman women of my city. My first playmates were Mussalman children." 38

Sarojini championed the cause of Hindu-Muslim unity by showing her equal devotion to both the religions in her verses. Steeped in Muslim culture and religious passion, such lines as the following in The Prayer of Islam :

"We are the shadows of Thy light,
We are the secrets of Thy might,
The visions of Thy primal dream"; 39

Or, in The Imam Bara :

"Mark, from the breeding silence
Breaks the wild cry of pain
Wrung from the heart of the ages
Ali ! Hassan ! Hussain ! 40

38. Padmini Sengupta, op.cit., p.23.

39. The S.E., pp.168-169.

40. Ibid., p.152.

Or, the Lines expressing Hindu religious sentiment

in Kali the Mother :

O terrible and tender and divine !
O mystic mother of all sacrifice,
We deck the sombre altars of thy shrine
With sacred basil leaves and saffron rice;
All gifts of life and death we bring to thee,
Uma Haimavati ! 41

Or, in The Flute-Player of Brindaban :

"Still must I like a homeless bird
Wander forsaking all,
The earthly loves and worldly lures
That held my life in thrall,
And follow, follow, answering
Thy magical flute-call;" 42

-- distinctly show a kind of spontaneous melody and religious passion, which is similar to what is revealed in folk-lyrics. In these poems purposiveness has been deftly wedded to lyricism and Sarojini emerges as a consummate inventor of lyric harmonies even in the spheres of religion and patriotism, where discordance is the general note.

A product of the Indian Renaissance, Sarojini's poetic genius is, no doubt, romantic, yet it is not divorced from reality. She delimited the territory of romantic fancy to accommodate her experiences in the world of reality. Her poems on 'Indian Scene' and 'Life and Death' show that inspite

41. Ibid., p.177.

42. Ibid., pp.161-162.

of her romanticism, she is not an escapist like Keats; rather like Wordsworth's 'skylark' she maintains a kind of harmony between 'heaven and home' -- the world of romantic imagination and that of reality'. This world of reality includes existential phenomena of sorrow and suffering, separation and death'. She does not desire to flee away from them; on the contrary, she resolves to face them heroically :

"Let us rise, O my heart, let us gather
the dreams that remain
We will conquer the sorrow of life
with the sorrow of song."43

All these aspects taken together make the complete image of Mrs. Sarojini Naidu whose inner life was never at variance with the outer, and any attempt to take up only a part of it and discuss in isolation will naturally lead to distortion and under-valuation. Her contribution to the field of Indian Writing in English as well as the National Freedom Movement must not be belittled on the plea that she is outmoded and does not suit the present age and milieu. Rather, in the present age, when the sense of values in the manifold cultural life of the nation is fast declining and the separatist and fundamentalist movements endanger national independence and integrity, the importance of a personality of her dimension needs no further explanation.