

PREFACE

Today, the identity of Indo-English Literature is established beyond any reasonable doubt. Its importance, too, as a separate genre of literature revealing the creative mind of Indian writers is being felt more strongly than ever, both here and abroad. The last few years of the present decade have witnessed increasing interest of the reading public in U.K. and U.S.A. in this new but mature and successful literature. All this is due to the ceaseless, sincere and undaunted effort of these writers to express themselves in a language they loved, adored and had mastery of but was not their mother tongue. Right from C.V. Rameswamy and Vivian Desai down to P.Lal, Missin Ezekiel and others in verse and from C.V. Borish and Ramchen Roy to R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao and others in Prose the same effort has been continuing and, the initial doubts and misgivings being over, Indo-English Literature today enjoys free and fresh air in the garden of world literature. But, unfortunately, the pioneers of this literature are treated with indifference and their real worth remains shrouded. Their contribution to its growth and development is yet to be assessed dispassionately. It needs no explanation that their individual accomplishments in the fields of Poetry and Prose contributed to the common pool of Indian writing in English language. My humble purpose in this thesis is to explore and assess the merits and demerits, if any, of one such pioneer of Indo-English literature and

endeavour to make a correct assessment of her Poetry in proper perspective.

Mrs. Sarojini Naidu occupies a unique position among the Pre-modern Indo-English poets who have substantially contributed to the development of Indo-English literature and lifted it to the international plane. She is one of those distinguished poets of India who have been acclaimed at home and abroad for their mastery of poetic art. Sarojini's poetic impulses can be traced in her own nature which was simple but visionary, wild but not aimless. She readily responded to her impulses in meaningful terms and devoted herself to writing poetry at an early age of eleven. She records thus :

"One day when I was sighing over a
sum in Algebra, it would n't come right;
but instead a whole poem came to me
suddenly. I wrote it down. From that
day my 'Poetic Career' began!"¹

Although her father wanted her to be a great mathematician or a scientist, the poetic instinct which she inherited from her parents proved stronger and she continued scribbling verses for self-expression since that fateful day. Poetry

1. Arthur Symonds, "Introduction" in The Golden Threshold (London : Heinemann, 1905), pp-17-18.

must have come to her as a natural gift and she could not help writing when the mood came.

Sarojini wrote one hundred and eightyfour poems in all. Though slender in bulk, they are a casket which contains some of the finest gems of lyricism of her age. Her early poems reveal her simple, dreamy and fanciful nature excited by her personal growth and self-discovery, while her later poems are marked by maturity in thought and expression. When she went to England and stayed there for her studies, 'the lyric child' in her responded rapturously to the sights and sounds of English countryside. While at King's College, London and later at Girton College, Cambridge, she frequented the literary circles of poets and critics like Arthur Symonds, Edmund Gosse and W.B. Yeats at the Rhymers' Club. Edmund Gosse, who knew and admired Mamohan Ghose and Toru Dutt earlier, advised her to turn to India for inspiration and ground her poems firmly on her native soil and assured her that her English readers would welcome some revelations of the heart of India.² Sarojini took the advise seriously and Indianised her themes and motifs accordingly. The poems written thereafter register a marked advance upon the earlier ones

2. Edmund Gosse, "Introduction" in The Bird of Time (London : Heinemann, 1912), pp. 4-5.

and the lyric child grew into a woman with insight and maturity. She gave an authentic Indian note to her poetry and virtually became a true poetic heir to Toru Dutt. Her later poetry reveals the charming panorama of Indian life in all its variety. But the fact remains that it is only the romantic aspects of the Indian scene and its pageantry and not the grinding poverty, squalor and rural tragedies that found a place in her poetry.

The period from 1890 to 1917 was the golden period of Sarojini's life from the point of view of her poetic creativity. It witnessed the lyric bloom of her genius and the rainbow colours of her fancy. Her poems are possessed of individual beauty and are a product of fine sensibility, acutely responsive to the discipline of poetic art. After her return from England Sarojini turned towards the sights and sounds and colours and smell of Nature with a fresh wonder and excitement. She was particularly fascinated by the joys and surprises of spring — the fresh lease of life the season brings to the land in its cyclical order. Like Wordsworth, she was drawn to Nature's intimacy, but she did not ascribe any moral sanctity to it, nor did she trace pantheism, the divine presence behind it, like Rabindranath. She believed in the sensuous perception of Nature's beauty as Keats did. Her whole being responded with admirable immediacy to the colours, beauty, smell and music of Nature.

The most absorbing theme in Sarojini's Poems is love, the very breath of life to her. Her love poems reflect various moods and emotions that love evokes in human heart — from the passionate desire for union to the mystic communion. To Sarojini love is a psycho-somatic relation involving emotion and its expression. In her intuition and insight into the psychology of love she comes distinctly close to John Donne and Emily Dickinson. Her personal experiences in love reach the impersonal plane to uphold the lofty Indian ideal of self-sacrifice. In her love poems one can easily trace the mystic concept of love held by Indian devotional love-poets of the past.

Sarojini was a lover of life and she sang and celebrated its joys and sorrows in her poetry. Her poetry revolves round the primal passions, simple facts of life and death, joy and sorrow, man and universe. She has presented an intense study of the psychological complexities of life without indulging in philosophical distinction. There is pain and misery in her poetic world, but the dominant note is always of hope and courage. She admits death as inevitable, but heroically offers it challenge. To her, life is worthliving and enjoying its romance, and despair and dejection are only temporary visitors.

A considerable number of poems of Sarojini throb with the passionate love for her motherland. Throughout her life she seems to be struggling between two equally powerful forces, namely, her craving to sing of the beauty and love and joy of life and her patriotic urge to serve the motherland. Some of her finest lyrics are charged with intense patriotic sentiments. Early in her life she had the burning desire to serve her country and countrymen; when the occasion came, she sacrificed song for service. Her patriotic sentiments sought useful expression and it is this urge that produced not only poems of patriotism but also a powerful and selfless leader of India's Freedom Movement.

Sarojini's genius is essentially lyrical. She is a born poet and a superb singer who sings with the ease and abundance of a free bird. Like Shelley, she possesses strong lyrical impulse and loves to express with 'full-throated ease' the spontaneous and passionate outpourings of her emotions. Like Shelley's Skylark, she sings her profuse strains with unmediated art. She is a lyric poet first and last. Like a true lyricist, she does not go beyond the lyric range to involve herself in the contours of Philosophy and mysticism in her typical lyrics on Nature. These are characterised by spontaneity, warmth and exuberance accompanied by delicate

fancy and haunting melody.

Sarejini is a supreme artist in words, imagery and versification. She shows her fondness for verbal felicity, metrical discipline and musical texture. She possesses a perfect command of English language and its metrical use. Her poems have prosodical correctness and regularity and yet they are not mechanical or artificial. Her metrical inventiveness can be noticed in her use of vernacular words and phrases for Indian colour and imagery, which, of course, has become the target of many a critic to attack her. Yet, "she is the most brilliant, the most original as well as the most correct to have written poems in English".³ She shows a strange love of rhythmic words and their sounds. They are used repeatedly, but with much dexterity. The strongest feature of her poetry, of course, is her vivid imagery, admirable in range and variety. Her images drawn from Nature are romantic in spirit and implication, while those from Indian myth, legend and folk-lore as well as from Islamic culture and tradition are no less impressive and beautiful. She develops thoughts with images and makes less familiar things more real and more familiar. Her metaphor, simile and personifications are handled so dexterously that they produce blocks of imagist perception. She is a symbolist, too, and her symbols, usually drawn from Nature,

3. Edmund Gosse, "Introduction" in 'The Bird of Time' (London : Hainemann, 1912), p.2.

myth, history and fairy tales, are conventional. At times she uses private symbols also to express her visions and emotions that are entirely personal. Her poetry is also marked by suggestiveness which she employs not only for decorative purposes, but to meet the unrestricted demands of expression of her sensitive soul through a language whose capacity is always finite. Her style has beauty and charm of its own and gives an impression of her individuality and originality. Generally, she shows a propensity for the ornate and sophisticated style with the choicest poetic diction. She is a finished and polished poetic artist and her poems are not only beautiful as works of art, but also fresh and fragrant like her roses and gulashum.

Sarojini does not belong to any school of poetry, nor does she imitate any particular poet; she is distinctly original in her outlook and expression. Since her own days her poetry has invited both bouquets and brick-bats from her readers and critics alike; naturally, much has been revealed about her poetic personality and yet, more remains to be explored and revealed. The task ahead is not only to explore and reveal new facets of her poetry and poetic self, but also to consider and weigh the views already expressed in this regard.

With gratefulness I acknowledge my debt to my supervisor Dr. S.P. Sengupta, M.A., Ph.D. (London), formerly Senior Professor of English at the University of North Bengal. I remain thankful to the staff of the National Library, British Council Library, North Bengal University Library, Calcutta University Library and Jadavpur University Library.

Note : For the purpose of documentation The MLA Style Sheet⁴ has been followed. In the following chapters (a) The Golden Threshold (London : Heinemann, 1906) will be referred to as The Golden Threshold, (b) The King of Kings (London : Heinemann, 1912) as The King of Kings (c) The Broken King (London : Heinemann, 1917) as The Broken King, (d) The Father of the Dam (Bombay : Asia Publishing House, 1961) as The Father of the Dam, and (e) The Sacred Flute (Allahabad : Kishore, 1942) as The Flute.

4. The MLA Style Sheet, American Research Centre, Hyderabad, 1970.