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Lyrical Aspect in the Poems of Sarojini Naidu

*–Arti Kumari**

Abstract

The first thing that strikes us in reading Sarojini Naidu's poetry is her exquisite melody and fine delicacy of feeling, an expression blended with the freshness and exuberance of spirit. The poetic world of Sarojini Naidu built around the themes of Nature, love, life, and folk projects a consistently joyous universe, reconstructed out of her own emotional life and supported by the images and symbols of human aspiration and hope. Her poems show a sensitive awareness of the progression of life towards the immutable coordination of Truth, Beauty and Joy. In her poetry, the lyric appeal is wonderful and full of the magic of melody. She sings of Indian myths, festivals and rituals. She speaks of the events of day to day life in an enchanting voice.

Keywords: Nature, Love, Truth, Beauty, Joy, Myth, Magic of melody.

Sarojini Naidu is primarily "a singer of songs" and a song bird, "The Nightingale of India" and "Bharat Kokila". Professor Vishwanathan is correct when he points out that it is a closed mind that thinks that she is not a song bird. In the opinion of Mr. Mathur, Sarojini is a "Supreme singer of beautiful songs, songs bathed in melody and thought." He finds a moving melody in her Indian folk songs. There can be no two opinions about the predominance of lyrical impulse in Sarojini's poetry. Her poems are mostly "short-swallow-flight of songs", some are full of rapture of spring and some other takes us into a world of inner ecstasy and spiritual elation and many other quivers with the passion of love. There are some poems which lead us into a heaven of India's luminous past.

Although her themes are ordinary, common - place and quotidian, a lover's cry of joy lends her poems a visionary appeal and a sense of personal immediacy. In her poetry, one comes across yearning and dream, action and suffering, joy and song. The impact of Indian devotional poets and Sufi mystics is tremendous on Sarojini's mind but her conception of nature does not correspond to that of the classical Indian poetry where nature is treated just as the physical environment of men and not as an automatic force.

Her conception of nature is neither completely Wordsworthian nor exclusively classical Indian but a fine blend of both. Her poetry revolves round the simple facts of

* *Teacher at Govt. High School, Brahmpura, Muzaffarpur, Bihar.*

life and death, joy and sorrow, man and universe. There is pain and misery in her poetic world but the dominant note is always of courage and hope, not of despair and dejection. She does not regard pain as a metaphysical evil, rather as a cleansing and beneficial form. It engenders pity, sympathy and charity. She would accept death in her stride, for her to accept death is to accept life. At times, she rises above her romantic wealth and ecstasy and presents an intense study of psychological complexities of human life without indulging in philosophical distinction which shows a marked out difference with others.

Sarojini is firmly rooted to the soil. She sings of Indian myths, festivals and rituals. She speaks of the events of day to day life in an enchanting voice. Arthur Symons admires and values her poetry chiefly for its effortless energy and lyrical grace. The first thing that at once holds the reader in a spell is its haunting music and delicacy of feeling blended with freshness and exuberance of spirit. The emotional urge and romantic impulse, with all its exuberance of colour, sound and perfume, result into memorable expression in her delicate quivering songs. K.R.R. Shastry rightly observes that her poems have 'the freshness and sweetness of a full–bloomed lotus as well as the musical cadence of a free bird singing in 'full–throated ease'. The genuineness, the moving quality and the immediacy of appeal which are to be found in the most accomplished of Shelley's or Swinburne's lyrics can be noticed in most of Sarojini's lyrics also. Sarojini shows a Keatsian passion for beauty in its purest form. Like him, her note is around beauty and her response to beauty and its all forms are quick and spontaneous. Beauty excites her and colour stirs her into liquid songs. She is by nature dreamy and fanciful, and her imagination weaves out exotic patterns of colour and beauty. Sarojini's poems are mostly short lovely spells of fancy. Each lyric is concerned with a single emotion. Each is an expression of the divine essence.

Her emotional experience varies in kind, and though its duration is short, it is subject to sudden shifts of intensity. Some of her poems are effusions of the rapture of spring, some take us to the colourful Indian spectacle, some transport us into the world of inner ecstasy but there are many which burn with the passion of love.

More than anything, Sarojini has a delicate and playful fancy. She says: "Do you know I have some very beautiful poems floating in the air and if the gods are kind to me, I shall cast my soul like a net and capture them". This is what she really does in her poems. In 'Medley' she says: "Dreams and delicate fancies / Dance thro' a poet's mind', and in "The Poet's Love Song" she tells us about her mad dreams:

> Mad dreams are mine to bind
> The world to my desire, and hold the wind
> A voiceless captive to my conquering song. (p. 36)

There are poems which are lovely webs of fancy, such as "Golden Cassia". Sarojini's imagination is so plastic and so original that it can give the best of her genius even in her short lyrics. In "Golden Cassia" the "brilliant blossom" which is mere "woodland flowers", are transfigured into things that only the poet's imagination can capture. These ordinary flowers are so rich in their hue and beauty that they arouse

strange romantic feelings in the poet's heart. She goes where her imagination takes her, and compares the blossoms to various objects of the earth and the sky:

> But, I sometimes think that perchance you are
> Fragments of some new–fallen star;
> Or golden lamps for a fairy shrine,
> Or golden pitchers for fairy wine.
> Perchance you are, o frail and sweet!
> Bright anklet–bells form the wild spring's feet,
> Or the gleaming tears that some fair bride shed
> Remembering her lost maiden head.
> But now, in the memorised dusk you seem
> The glimmering ghosts of a bygone dream. (p. 96)

Sarojini's lyrics are possessed of an individual beauty, and are a product of her fine sensibility, acutely responsive to the external world.

In some of her lyrics, Sarojini enters the children's world to capture their innocence and tenderness. They are, in fact, songs of innocence which she derives from vernacular models of lullaby. "Cradle song" opens in the fertile drowsy landscape of Indian village with its paddy fields, neem trees and fireflies. The fairy mother sings a sweet song to induce her child to sleep. All the lovely and sweet things which may be associated with sleep–groves of spice, the lotus, the fireflies, the fairy neem and the poppy–boles –have been gathered. A colourful little world of fancy is created. But it is a real world, at the same time, as it is dominated by the mother and the child. Nature with all its wealth is seen throbbing around:

> From groves or spice,
> O'er fields of rice,
> Athwart the lotus-stream,
> I bring for you,
> A glint with dew
> A little lovely dream. (p.17)

The second stanza beautifully paints a fragrant and drowsy Indian evening with "neem" and "poppy-bole" and "fireflies":

> Sweet, shut your eyes,
> The wild fireflies
> Dance through the fairy neem;
> From the poppy-bole
> For you I stole
> A little lovely dream. (p.17)

The stars are now gleaming in the sky and it is proper time for the child to sleep and be transported to his dreamland of wonder and joy. The fairy mother has stolen a lovely dream for her beloved child:

In golden night
The stars around you gleam;
On you I press
With soft caress
A little lovely dream. (p.17)

The natural imagery employed in the poem suggests harmony, beauty and repose that the mother seeks from nature. Her love and concern towards fullness and fulfillment is clearly expressed in the tender accents of a lullaby. Its sweetness and spontaneity is like some bird's song. The simplicity and abandonment to sheer joy of singing is refreshing and delightful. The words like 'spice', 'eyes', 'flies', 'stars', 'press', and 'caress' create sweet whispering note of lullaby, befitting the atmosphere of children's world of fancy and dream. The intense fragrance of neem and poppy-bole is intoxicating, and is quite suggestive in the case of a child falling to sleep. The poet has woven a dream motif into a dawn-to-dusk pattern of the poem. The poem is cast in three stanzas which correspond beautifully to the three states of a child falling to sleep. There is the waking child who is induced by Nature to sleep, then the child falling to sleep intoxicating fragrance of neem and poppy-bole, and finally, the child dreaming. The rhythmic movement suits the tender theme; it evokes the image of a mother rocking the cradle of her beloved child. The poem can be called a master-piece of creation, for here superb fancy has been blended with equally superb craftsmanship.

In "To my children" Sarojini expresses her deep love and concern for her children: Jaya Surya, Padmaja, Randhira and Leelamani. The form again is of folk lullaby. While invoking the god's blessings for them, she reveals her own hopes and aspirations regarding her children. The poem is cast in four stanzas, each devoted to a child reflecting mother's dreams. The mother has high hopes for Jaya Surya who is like the 'Golden sun of victory'. She blesses her son:

May your growing glory prove
Sacred to your consecration,
To my art and to my nation…… (p. 51)

Padmaja in Sanskrit means lotus maiden, hence her mother wishes her to enjoy all the ecstasy of life. She invokes Goddess Lakshmi, who is also lotus-born, to defend her beloved daughter. The mother blesses: "May you be/ Fragrant of all ecstasy". Randhira stands for chivalry in Sanskrit so he must-

Learn to conquer, learn to fight
In the foremost flanks of right
Like Valmiki's heroes bold. (p. 52)

He may be 'lord of battle' and 'lord of love and chivalry.'

They must pay heed to their individual demands as well as the challenges of humanity. Sarojini, herself a dynamic personality, wishes a dynamic life for her children. In "Child Fancies", also a song of innocence, the poet observes life as a great chain of being. It runs from one end of the universe to another, form poppy seed to tee glow-worm, from the silver sunbeam to dragonfly, form Ababeel to the stars. A child is a

great creation of God. He is as innocent and divine as God's laughter. He is simple of heart and fresh in vision. He looks at the world with wide-eyed wonder and excitement. The fancies of the child are curled around poppy seed, dragon-fly and Ababeel. The child wants to solve the mystery about these things in his own innocent way. In the opening stanza, he puts a question to poppy seed:

I wonder are you cold, are you lonely, do you need
A little glowworm sparks
Near your cradle in the dark
Till you fall asleep and dream yourself
A flower, poppy seed?

In the next stanza, the life of dragonfly poses a puzzle to him. He is-

eager to know how it spreads its
wings of green and red.
And go gathering lotus honey
From the pools.

And, in the last stanza, the child puts such searching question-

When you reach the shining blue,
Ababeel, Ababeel,
Do you touch the stars behind the clouds, do you feel
Brave enough to talk,
With the eagle and the hawk,
Tho' you're only just a tiny speck
Of life, Ababeel.

The journey from the poppy seed to the Ababeel is an evolutionary journey from the earthly to the ethereal, from the cradle in the dark to the stars behind the cloud. Though there are only questions and no answer, we get a glimpse of the peculiar functioning of a child's mind. The nursery song structure of the poem lends it a touch of familiarity. In her child songs and lullabies, Sarojini cherishes to preserve an innocence which has the power of crystallising ordinary objects into transparent figures and images of sheer lyrical beauty. She, whether speaks of her lyric passion of cystic devotion, remains essentially a lyric child all her life. She is found invoking her fair fancies, and subtly creating an innocent world of infant dreams. Of all the seasons and states of mind she speaks with childlike eagerness and innocence. In 'On Juhu Sands' she shows a childlike eagerness and enthusiasm towards life. She is found gathering gleaming shells in the sands at the sea shore.

Idly I gather gleaming shells
And drifting sea weed plumes,
But my heart dreams in hidden dells
Where wild narcissus blooms.

A melodic sing-song pattern is what arrests our attention in 'Village Song'. The mother talks the child bride to whom fairies call insistently. She is too young to have

fascination for 'bridal songs' and 'sandal-scented leisure'. It is hard to ignore the lyrical charm and the melodic perfection of the following lines:

> Honey, child, honey, child, whither are our going?
> Would you cast your jewels all to the breezes blowing?
> Would you leave the mother who on golden grain has fed you?
> Would you grieve the lover who is rising forth to wed you? (p.11)

The child, fascinated by nature's unspeakable beauty and balmy solitude, finds practically no interest in the trivial luxuries of life. The beauty of wild life is more alluring than the glittering worldly life. The lure of the forest call is simply irresistible to her:

> Mother mine, to the wild forest I am going,
> The voices of the fairy-folk are calling me, O listen. (p.11)

The fairies form an integral part in the structure of the poem. The poet expresses her strong craving for the mythological existence through overtones and undertones of the child. The poem has graver notes. The poet is fully aware of the intricacies of human life, its mixed fabric of pleasure and pain but nature's magical mirth holds her in a spell:

> The bridal songs and cradle songs have cadences of sorrow,
> The laughter of the sun today, the wind of death tomorrow.
> For sweeter sounds the forest–notes where forest streams are falling;
> O mother mine, I cannot stay, the fairy folk are calling. (p.12)

The lines show distinctly Shelley's impress of thought. They are reminiscent of his oft-quoted lines:

> We look before and after,
> And pine for what is not:
> Our sincerest laughter
> With some pain is fraught;
> Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought

It is a superb lyric with its rhythmic movement, lucidity of diction and spontaneity of expression. Sarojini is a great artist who is capable of creating new and rich world of ideas chastening her on little themes. Sarojini, like Keats, links beauty with truth, and makes it a thing of permanent experience, a thing of constant joy. "She is two things in the main; a supreme artist and a fine melodist with the background of an intense thinker." Her thinking may not be methodical but lofty ideas are there. She is a poet, a being of emotion and her emotions lead her to splendour of thoughts.

'The Victory' is a powerful love poem which has freshness, lilt and liquidity of a bird's song. It is typical of Sarojini in its luxuriant diction and imagery. It captures the Hindu spirit and atmosphere in its revelation of an aspect of the relationship between the lover and the beloved that is constantly stressed in her love poetry. The victor has arrived but the maiden has nothing to offer him as a token of love and reverence. The world welcomes him with words of praise and precious gifts:

They brought their peacock-lutes of praise
And carven gems in jasper trays,
Rich stores of fragrant musk and myrrh,
And wreathes of scarlet nenuphar….
I had no offering that was meet,
and bowed my face upon his feet. (p. 151)

But the poet has nothing to offer except her intense passion of love towards him: 'I had no offering that was met/ and bowed my face upon his feet'. She cannot welcome her love with precious worldly objects, with rich robes and 'pearls and silver blooms' but with her heart-felt love and devotion.

The last stanza captures the characteristic Hindu spirit of devotion in its dominant note of surrender and sacrifice. The poet is eager to surrender her life at the altar of love: 'I had no offering that was met/and laid my life before his feet.' Sarojini, like Browning, is faithful to her sensuous and passionate temperament. As a result, she responds freely and frankly to not only the vivid light and colour of the world around her, but also to human urges and instincts.

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