
Portrayal of Women in the Poetry of Sarojini Naidu

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Abstract

K.R.S. Iyengar speaks of Sarojini Naidu as ‘one of Mother India’s most gifted children, readily sharing her burden of pain, fiercely articulating her agonies and hopes, and gallantly striving to redeem the Mother and redeem the time.’ Sarojini Naidu dedicated her life to the enhancement of the status of Indian women. She strongly advocated women’s education, abolition of child marriage, and remarriage of widows. This paper attempts to study the portrayal of women in the select poems of Naidu. The women in Sarojini Naidu’s poetry are subject to the religious traditions that were strictly adhered to in those days. The women were an embodiment of love, dedication, and sacrifice. The feelings, agony, pain, and commitment to filial duties of women are presented in poems like *Pardah Nashin*, *Suttee*, *An Indian Love Song*, *In Praise of Gulmohar Blossom*, and *Bangle Sellers*. *Pardah Nashin* is a poignant and evocative poem that depicts Indian women who live a secluded life behind the veil. The poem speaks of the struggles of living in patriarchal societies and yearns to break free from the confines of her veil and experience the world beyond it. The poem *Suttee* reveals the pathetic condition of an Indian widow. It beautifully conveys the selfless and highly devoted love of an Indian woman towards her husband. The widow sings a song before sacrificing her life along with her husband, as the practice of Sati was prevalent during that time. The duties of women as daughters, obedience to parents, and upholding the family’s honour are intricately depicted in *Bangle Sellers* and *In Praise of Gulmohar Blossom*. The works of Sarojini Naidu, with their rich imagery, leave a lasting impact on the minds of the readers.

Keywords: Empowerment, Portrayal of Women, Patriarchal Societies, Veil, Sati, Filial Duties

The introduction of the English language dates back to the 17th Century when the East India Company was established in India and started using it for official use in government bodies. The English language was first introduced at the time when the printing press was set up in India with the publication of its first printed newspaper, Hickey’s Bengal Gazette. In 1793,

the first book, *The Travels of Dean Mahomet*, was written by an Indian in English. During this period, the British brought about many educational reforms in Indian society, the missionaries established educational institutions, and many Indians had the urge to learn and use the English language, which gradually promoted writing in Indian English. The Charter Act of 1813 and the 1835 English Education Act of William Bentinck made English the medium of education in India. English literature was established as one of the disciplines in educational institutions.

During the mid-1800s, modern European scientific techniques came to be used in India. A movement in modern Indian literature began with the reforms and initiatives taken by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. India witnessed an awakening that shaped literature in a new light; Indian writing started to adapt new literary techniques, genres, and forms from the West.

The introduction of prose style and its further development in literature influenced Indian writers to adopt modern creative forms of writing, such as poetry, novel, drama, and short story. Most of the early practitioners of Indian English Literature were British; although there were many Indian exponents who arrived sometime later, the history of Indian English literature belonged solely to the elite British section of the society. The works of George Orwell, Rudyard Kipling, and Jim Corbett offered the preliminary push towards the growth of Indian English Writings that was later developed by other British writers. The contribution made by Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, R.C. Dutt, Raja Rao, Sarojini Naidu, Jawaharlal Nehru, Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, and many others consolidated the historical maturity of English literature in India.

Sarojini Naidu, known as the ‘Nightingale of India’, was a celebrated poet, playwright, proponent of civil rights, and Indian independence activist. It was said that her poetry was so beautiful it could also be sung. From 1905 to 1912, she wrote three collections of poems. ‘*The Golden Threshold*’, published in 1905, was the first collection that brought her recognition as *Bul Bule Hind*, or *Bharata Khokila*, – the Nightingale of India. She dedicated ‘*The Golden Threshold*’ to Edmund Gosse, an author whom she met when studying in England, who, she said, “first showed me the way to the golden threshold.” Sarojini Naidu’s second volume of poems, “*The Bird of Time*,” was published in 1912. The third and final collection, “*The Broken Wing*,” was published in 1917. The collection comprises *Songs of Love, Death, and Destiny*. The memorial verses addressed to her father and to Gokhale are highly notable.

Sarojini Naidu was a strong advocate for women’s rights and worked towards their empowerment through education and political participation. She strongly advocated

women's education, abolition of child marriage, and remarriage of widows. The women portrayed in Sarojini Naidu's poetry are subject to the religious traditions that were strictly adhered to in those days. The women depicted were an embodiment of love, dedication, and sacrifice who endured pain and grief because of religious and social practices. This paper makes an attempt to study the plight of women in a socio-cultural driven society. Women in Sarojini Naidu's poems have a great sense of responsibility towards their parental home with a strong intent to uphold the family's honour. The feelings of agony and commitment to filial duties are intricately presented in poems like *Pardah Nashin*, *Suttee*, *An Indian Love Song*, *In Praise of Gulmohar Blossom*, and *Bangle Sellers*.

In *Pardah Nashin*, Sarojini Naidu explores the life of a secluded woman, hidden behind intricate lattice work.

*Her life is a revolving dream
Of languid and sequestered ease;
Her girdles and her fillets gleam
Her raiment is like morning mist
Shot opal, gold and amethyst.*

*From thieving light of the eyes impure
From coveting sun or wind's caress
Her days are guarded and secure
Behind her carven lattices;
Like jewels in a turbaned crest,
Like secrets in a lover's breast.*

In stanzas one and two, this seclusion is meant to shield her from the world, but with the passage of time, she experiences suffering behind closed doors. The poem speaks volumes about the ongoing struggles of women, the subjugation, and the yearning for freedom. The imagery of women's ornate clothing behind the lattices indicates a sense of comeliness and isolation.

*But though no hand unsanctioned dares
Unveil the mysteries of her grace,
Time lifts the curtain unawares,
And sorrow looks into her face.
Who shall prevent the subtle years,
Or shield a woman's eyes from tears?*

In stanza three, the caged bird becomes symbolic of women who are denied freedom of thought and live in isolation with their unfulfilled dreams. The poet brings in the influence of customs and traditions and emphasizes the need for social reform and gender parity. The lyrical language of the poem is rich and evocative.

Sarojini Naidu, in her poem, *Suttee*, highlights the ancient social practice of Sati, where the widow self-immolates herself with her dead husband in the funeral pyre. The woman addresses her husband in stanza one as '*The lamp of my life,*' in stanza two as '*Tree of my life,*' and in stanza three as '*Life of my life.*' In stanzas one and two, the speaker of the poem reflects on her own life as she is lost in complete darkness. The death of her husband makes the speaker question 'whether the blossoms can survive if the tree itself is dead.' The speaker expresses her pathetic predicament and ponders whether the body can continue to survive when the soul has departed. The poem shows the love and devotion the woman has for her husband. Sarojini Naidu strongly uses rhetorical devices to indicate contrasting ideas of life and death. Death is personified as if it were a person responsible for separating her from her husband. The first line of all three stanzas shows the powerful use of *antithesis*.

Lamp of my life, the lips of Death
Tree of my life, Death's cruel foot
Life of my life, Death's bitter sword

The poem *An Indian Love Song* is a conversation between the lover and his beloved. The lover expresses his undying love for his beloved. The lover pleads with his beloved to remove the veil as he longs to see her beautiful face. The beloved wonders if revealing her face would go against the customs of her race. The beloved tells that she is bound by the law, which does not permit her to reciprocate his love. She speaks of an ancient feud and the historical conflicts between their communities, which make their union difficult.

Profane the law of my father's creed for a foe of my father's race?
Thy kinsmen have broken our sacred altars and slaughtered our sacred kine,
The feud of old faiths and the blood of old battles sever thy people and mine.

The lover's kinsmen have broken her community's sacred altar, temples, ritual places, and slaughtered her race, and accepting his love would be disastrous to her race. But for the lover, his love is beyond these feuds and transcends all societal and cultural differences. The

poem creates a sense of true love and deep longing with the use of imagery, rhyme, and rhythm. It beautifully portrays the sense of responsibility and duty of the daughter towards her race. The poem indicates that a woman has the power to sacrifice her true love to uphold her father's honour.

In the poem, *In Praise of Gulmohar Blossom* Sarojini Naidu speaks of the lovely shade of Gulmohar flowers, which blossom in the spring season. The surpassing beauty of the rich colour cannot be rivalled by the 'Glimmering red of the bridal robe' nor the 'rich red of a wild bird's wing.' The poem glorifies the valour of Rajput women.

*Or the blood that poured from a thousand breasts
To succor a Rajput queen?*

Sarojini Naidu refers to the beautiful queen of Chittor, Padmini, who, along with other women, sacrificed her life by performing 'Jouhar' as the kingdom of Chittor lost a battle against Allaudin Khilji. The women had to sacrifice their lives to save their honour and purity. The women described in the poem were chivalrous, dedicated, and brave, but sadly, they are victims of ancient customs and traditions.

The Bangle Sellers is another work of Sarojini Naidu, which celebrates the lives of women. It vividly describes the attachment women have to bangles early in their lives. The poem speaks of different stages of a woman's life, like maidenhood, marriage, motherhood, and the fondness they have for bangles. Silver and blue coloured bangles are worn by young women, red, yellow, and orange coloured bangles are for newlywed brides, purple, gold, and grey coloured bangles are for the middle-aged women who have supported their husbands in joy and sorrow, and also raised their children well. The duties that a woman performs as a maiden in her father's household and as a married woman are beautifully represented in the last two lines of the poem.

*And serves her household in fruitful pride,
And worships the gods at her husband's side.*

Sarojini Naidu's women in her poems are endowed with remarkable virtues. The women portrayed are valiant, determined, devoted, but entangled in the socio-cultural bondages of time. Sarojini Naidu's contribution to emancipating and educating women brought a change in society. She led women by example as her life and works stand as a testimony to the power and tenacity of women.

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