



15th March 2020

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ISBN : 978-81-944855-9-9

A SUBALTERN REVIEW OF POETRY AND POLITICAL THOUGHT OF SAROJINI NAIDU

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ABSTRACT

Sarojini Naidu was Indian National Congress spokesperson during India's fight for independence. Charming and filled with verse, her impromptu speeches also fascinated the public. In the resistance campaigns she was jailed four times, taking part in many satyagraha activities and demonstrations against non-cooperation. She was one of the founding members of the Women's Conference all-India. She never viewed herself as a feminist, distancing herself from Western feminism. Yet, she devoted her entire life to improving Indian women's status. The controversial figure of Sarojini will be discussed in this paper to examine her role in empowering Indian women from a postcolonial and subaltern perspective of studies. "The dream of freedom is a spiritual condition which gives

every kind of slavery we must accept a value of courage or desperation." To Leonardo [da Vinci] the notion of liberation was a

requirement with its besetting fantasies of wings beating the blue air. Yet he meant personal independence, the happiness of an uncaged mind! Everywhere he could establish his independence around him, with his rich and prevailing qualities. What a wonderful power to invoke, what a beautiful refuge from the chaos and misery of the world within yourself.

KEYWORDS: *spokesperson, Western feminism, postcolonial, demonstrations, postcolonial.*

INTRODUCTION

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ISBN : 978-81-944855-9-9

Sarojini Naidu was Indian National Congress spokesperson during India's fight for independence. As its strong correspondence shows, she was a special friend of Gandhi. The masses were highly impressed by her impromptu speeches, beautiful and filled with poetry known as "Bulbul-e-Hind," the "Nightingale of India." During the disobedience movements she was jailed four times, taking part in several satyagraha actions and protests about non-cooperation. She was one of the founding members of the Women's Conference all-India. She traveled to several nations, spreading the word from Gandhi and lecturing on Indian women's status. Sarojini dedicated her entire life to empowering Aboriginal people. She advocated education for women, ending child marriage, and widow remarriage. Nevertheless, she never thought of herself as feminist and distanced herself from Western feminism. Her poetry has frequently been criticized for giving a traditionalist image of the role of women, and for romanticizing the status of women in ancient India, since she does not seem to question patriarchal power in writing. Sarojini's poetry and prose will be

contrasted in this paper to discuss this apparent contradiction between her poems and her writing. However, this paper provides an examination of the writings and acts of Sarojini from a perspective of "subaltern studies." More precisely, I'll show how the limitations of Sarojini in her women's lyrics are the same limitations we see in her political thinking, which underlies her subaltern status and her failure in her attempt to find an effective alternative direction from Western feminism. As Choudhury (2015) suggests, in the "New South" the determination of feminism does not surpass the understanding of a cultural gap. On the contrary, differences and subjectivity can be used as important categories of feminism for interpretation (see Choudhury 2015 and Chakravarty 2016). That's why I wanted to take an approach that takes into account the cultural context and individual experience of Sarojini, and then examine her political thinking about the role of women in India. I'll provide a brief description of Sarojini's life and political experience in the first segment. I'm referring to some of the many biographies published of her life in the

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following biographical sketch: Sarojini Naidu A Biography, by Sarojini Naidu, by Makarand R. Paranjape (2012), by Padmini Sengupta (1966). Her Life, Work, and Poetry by Vishvanath S. Naravane (2012), and the later Sarojini Naidu by Anu Kumar. The Nightingale and the Struggle for Independence (2014). Certain important references are Women Behind Mahatma (1954) by Eleanor Morton, while not dedicated exclusively to Sarojini, Sarojini 's selected letters to Gandhi, in The Mahatma and The Poetess, edited by Mrinalini Sarabhai (1998), and Selected Letters 1890s to 1940s, edited by M. From Paranjape (1996). In the second section I will review the political writings and speeches of Sarojini, to address the role of Sarojini in achieving equality for Indian women. The third article deals with her controversial writing. The collected poetry Sarojini discussed in this paper has been taken from The Golden Threshold (1905), The Beginning of Time (1912), The Shattered Wing (1917), and The Feather of a Dawn (1961). We consider other compositions in Selected Poetry and Prose, compiled by Paranjape, and Sarojini Naidu's (1925)

Speeches and Writings. In particular, I will concentrate on those writings dedicated to women's empowerment, such as "Women's Education and India's Unification," "Indian Women and the Franchise," "Hindu Widows," "Indian Women's Revival," "Women in National Life," "Hindu's Ladies," collected in Speeches and Writings (Naidu, 1925). Sarojini Naidu was born in Hyderabad, on 13 February 1879. Her family was rich, with a house on the property and a maid. Her father, Aghorenath Chattopadhyay, obtained a PhD in Chemistry from the University of Scotland, Edinburgh. He abandoned chemistry in 1881, when he established the Anglo Hindu Vernacular School for girls in Hyderabad. He has attached great importance to education , especially the education of women. He advocated social reforms such as access to education for women, remarriage for widows and the end of child marriage. He lived in the house, better known as "The Golden Threshold" where Sarojini Naidu was born, with his family at Hyderabad, on Nampally Road. There he welcomed writers, poets, authors, musicians, aristocrats, singers, professors trained in Oxford, village

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priests, scientists, intellectuals from the Islamic, Hindu and Orthodox worlds. There was also the Nampally Girls School on Nampally Road, built with his wife's support. Varada Sundari Devi, mother of Sarojini, was a Bengali poet. She studied at Bharat Ashram, an educational institution founded by the Indian social reformer Keshub Chunder Sen. Varada Sundari composed lyrics in Bengali that were sweet-tempered, calm, gentle, quiet, apparently reserved. Sarojini was the first of eight girls. Her father educated her in the house. She had read and written a lot of poetry from childhood. Sarojini left for London in 1895, and taught at King's College and at Cambridge's Girton Girls School. Sarojini always skipped the dull, too formal classes, to enjoy the English countryside, and to compose landscape-inspired poems about nature. Arthur Symons was introduced to her and she met the poet Edmund Gosse and showed them some of her compositions. Edmund Gosse said she was a true Deccan poet, rather than an Anglicized poet. There was subsequently a transition in her poetry from European skylarks to bulbuls, Indian birds. Many of her poems have been

dedicated to her beloved Govindarajulu Naidu – a young doctor she met before she left for England in India. As she returned to India in 1898 her parents had no more objections to her and Mr Naidu's union. She had four children: Padmaja and Lilamani, two girls and two boys, Jayasurya and Ranadhira. In 1903, during the 18th Indian National Congress Session, Bombay, she started her affiliation to the nationalist movement. She recited "Ode to India" on this occasion, and she met Gopal Krishna Gokhale, her future mentor, and Ramabai Ranade, one of the founders of the liberation movements of Indian women. Finally, Sarojini became the key focus of the nationalistic cause and the need to promote women's empowerment in India. Gokhale had inspired Sarojini to devote her poetry and creativity to the motherland. We expressed the same thoughts on the issue of unity between Hindu and Muslim people. During that important meeting, Gokhale introduced Sarojini to Gandhi, leading to giving her life a special turn. During her first meeting in 1914, she took on the task of introducing Gandhi's precepts to the public and explaining them systematically.

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Gokhale, a mentor to Sarojini, passed away in the same year. This was a turning point for Sarojini, whose interest in social and political issues from now on has been paramount in her life. After returning to India she threw herself into the freedom movement. Sarojini had met Nerhu Jawaharlal. He was 10 years younger and he soon began her to have a younger sibling. Her letters to Nerhu are a blend of love, humor, and appreciation. She got to know the entire Nerhu family and defined "an integral part of India 's fight for independence story" (Naravane 2012, Location 1179). For Sarojini the years 1917 and 1918 had been hard. She participated in many meetings and gave numerous speeches: she addressed the Madras Students' Convention in 1917, with Annie Beasant as its President. Following the British Army's massacre of Jallianwala Bagh (Amritsar massacre) on April 13, 1919, against an unarmed crowd – hundreds died and wounded, including many women and children – the political participation of Sarojini turned into a staunch nationalism. In speeches against the iniquity of the British rule she used her pen and her skillful

speaking ability. She speaks of "women's ill-treatment during the Punjab martial law" (Letter to Gandhi, September 2, 1920: 152). Sarojini's awareness of the role of Indian women started to expand after this date. In July 1919 Sarojini went to England as a deputation member of the Home Rule League. She spent a year here, maintaining contact with the Indian community. Sarojini gave public lectures to the English public showing the real situation in India and speaking out against the British rule's hypocrisy. Gandhi launched the non-cooperation movement upon her return in 1920. The boycott campaign included teachers, lawyers and ordinary citizens. People abstained from buying foreign products, for instance clothing. Sarojini helped Gandhi develop passive resistance self control. She demonstrated the nonviolent tactics through manifestos and her speeches to the people. A number of people had been jailed by the end of the year. Throughout India Gandhi launched a hartal (strike). Sarojini was actively involved in the peaceful demonstrations, and many women joined her, inspired by her example. Sarojini also flew around the

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world in the 1920s. She went to Africa and participated at the 1924 Kenyan Indian Congress. She went to Durban, Mombasa, where she spoke up against segregation. Gandhi had been released on her return to India on account of his illness. She chaired Legislative Kanpur session in 1925. The New York Times has called her the "Joan Arc of India" on this occasion. She proposed the creation of a women's section of the Congress during her presidency, and

supported the special need to address women's issues in India. She traveled in north India during this time. She also met with student delegations at the University of Allahabad, usually accompanied by sister Nehru. During this time the relations between Muslims and Indians deteriorated. For her political career, the late 1920s were important, as she was appointed President of Congress in 1925 and was Gandhi's unofficial ambassador to America.



Sarojini Naidu

She entered New York in 1928. She gave lectures, poetry readings, attended festivals, met literary figures, authors, intellectuals.

She loved the countryside, and the sense of responsibility, love of democracy, and hope of the people. She met Jane Addams and

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respected those "splendid women who make use of their money, rank and talent in serving fine national causes for humanity's advancement. Jane Addams "– continues Sarojini –" is the leader among them of course "(Letter to Gandhi, 19 November 1928: 214). The Grand Canyon inspired a sense of the sublime in her; she likened it to a majestic temple constructed by God. She was in Cincinnati visiting the home of Harriet Beecher Stowe. At Howard University, she met several Black Professors. She gave black people her love, and visited Indian reservations. She joined Congress after their return to India. When Nehru was named president of Congress in 1929, the political party had adopted complete independence. Gandhi launched the celebrated Dandi march against the Salt Tax in March of the same year. Sarojini joined Gandhi and broke the Salt Law, which told the satyagrahis to remain nonviolent. After Gandhi was arrested on 5 May she was given the movement's leadership. She tried to reach the salt works of Dharasana, and was arrested. She supported Gandhi in September 1932 and February 1942, during his fast. Sarojini and

Gandhi's aunt, Kasturba, had been imprisoned many times, the longer in Aga Khan Palace. In the year 1931, Gandhi and Sarojini moved to England. Sarojini attended lectures and readings here, and met with friends. She flew to Italy and to Switzerland and then to South Africa. Soon after her return to India, Sarojini had been arrested but was soon released because of illness. In 1932 Gandhi began a speedy protest against the announcement by their leader, Dr. Ambedkar, of separate electorates of untouchables. Then, during 1933-34, he founded the Harjian newspaper and traveled on foot. In those struggles Sarojini also accompanied him. In 1942 the Congress adopted the resolution Quit India, calling on the British to quit India. Thousands of citizens were arrested. Even Sarojini was jailed. In gaol, she inspired other prisoners with motivating intent. She was feeling great sadness when Mahadev Desai and Kasturba Gandhi passed away in prison. Gandhi was freed in 1944. By meeting Jinnah several times he helpfully sought to achieve peace. Finally, however, the British transferred power to two independent states on 15 August 1947: India

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and Pakistan. The partition was a dramatic occurrence between the two nations, with protests, mass migrations of refugees, rapes and violence. On January 30, 1948, a Hindu nationalist assassinated Gandhi at a Delhi prayer meeting. In those dramatic days Sarojini continued to remain the same, important Congress column. While Gandhi's assassination left a deep sorrow in Sarojini, she showed self-control. She spoke about him in her speech at Gandhi's funeral as "a lineal descendant of all the great teachers who taught the gospels of truth, love, and peace" (Naravane 2012: Location 1169). Nehru nominated Sarojini for governor of Uttar Pradesh. She proved herself to be a great lawgiver in these final years; she met students in many universities at conferences and festivals, and never stopped being a woman of faith, infusing positive energy to the people around her. She has been sick in the late winter of 1949. She died March 2nd, 1949. Sixty thousand people observed Sarojini Naidu's ultimate departure in silent grief, at her funeral on the banks of the Gomti River.

POLITICAL WRITINGS ON WOMEN

In 1917 she set up the Women's Indian Association, with Annie Besant, Dorothy Graham Jinarajadassa, whose main aim was to obtain women's right to vote. With the Government of India Act (1919) women's right to vote was denied. This led to widespread protests, and Sarojini inquired why the British did not extend the franchise to women. Paradoxically, the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms stated that this resolution wanted to protect the rights of a minority of women secluded in purdanashin – i.e. secluded women – not to provoke religious men. As Geraldine Forbes writes, "excluding females from the India Act seemed to be de facto recognition of male authority over women" (Forbes 2004: 100). Sarojini set her battle against indentured labour – known as Girmitya in Hindi – for an intense period. Sarojini was aware of women's exploitation through this practice, since they were uprooted from their homes, transported from India to Fiji to work on the sugarcane plantations. Many women escaped from dowry, poverty, and oppressive situations, to encounter miserable conditions. Sarojini travelled to Kenya, South Africa, and Southern Rhodesia, where

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she spread her message against indentured labour. She condemned it and especially condemned the ill-practice of exploitation of poor women. British Guiana abolished indentured labour firstly, and Fiji only in 1920. She had been affiliated with the International Women's Congress. In 1925 Sarojini became the first Indian woman to serve as the President of the Indian National Congress. This was a great and symbolic achievement. The next year the women's movement gained its first success: women could be appointed members of legislatures by nomination. In the same year she became associated with the All India Women's Conference (AIWC). This organization was

originally conceived for an educational scope; subsequently, along with Sarojini presidency, also political issues were considered by AIWC. Margaret Cousins headed the AIWC initiatives and contributed to the foundation of women's movement in India. Margaret, together with her husband James, joined the Beasant's Theosophical Society in 1915, from their arrival in India. Margaret Cousin and Annie Beasant wanted to give an organisation to women's activities. Sarojini bridged between the activity of AIWC and the National Congress. She also worked for the solidarity among women all over the world.



Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu during the Salt Satyagraha.

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In 1917, with Annie Besant, Dorothy Graham Jinarajadassa, she founded the Women's Indian Association, whose main purpose was to obtain women's right to vote. With the Indian Government Act (1919) women were denied the right to vote. This led to widespread demonstrations and Sarojini wondered why the British had not expanded the franchise to women. Paradoxically, the reforms of Montagu-Chelmsford claimed that this resolution aimed to secure the rights of a minority of women who are secluded in purdanashin – that is, women who are secluded – not to offend religious people. As Geraldine Forbes writes, "the de facto acceptance of male authority over women appeared to be removing females from the India Act" (Forbes 2004: 100). Sarojini set an intense period in her fight against indentured labor – known in Hindi as Girmitya. Through this experience, Sarojini became aware of the oppression of women as they were removed from their homes and transported from India to Fiji to work on sugarcane plantations. To endure miserable conditions, many women fled the dowry, deprivation and oppressive situations. Sarojini traveled to Kenya, South

Africa, Southern Rhodesia, spreading her message of indentured labor. She condemned it, and in particular condemned the abuse of poor women for exploitation. Firstly, British Guyana prohibited indentured labor, and only in 1920 did Fiji. She 'd been associated with the Congress of International Women. Sarojini became the first Indian woman to serve as Chair of the Indian National Congress in 1925. That was a great achievement and a symbolic one. The women's movement achieved its first victory the next year: women could be elected by appointment as members of legislatures. She became associate with the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in the same year. Initially designed for an educational framework, this organization was also considered by AIWC along with the presidency of Sarojini. Margaret Cousins led the AIWC programs and was instrumental in launching the women's movement in India. Margaret joined the Beasant Theosophical Society in 1915, with her husband James, from their arrival in India. Margaret Cousin and Annie Beasant decided to give women's events an organisation. Sarojini bridged AIWC 's



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activities with National Congress. She has also worked around the world to foster unity among women.

DREAMS OF POETESS

Sarojini Naidu learned poetry from a very young age: in the early stages of her life, she wrote her key poetry volumes: *The Golden Threshold*, 1905, and *The Bird of Time: Songs of Life, Death and the Spring*, 1912. All were printed in London with the help of Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symons, two English poets associated with the English romantic revival. She wrote her last lifetime poetry volume, *The Broken Wing: Songs of Love, Death and the Spring* in 1917. The other collections were published posthumously, *The Sceptred Flute: Songs of India* (1943), *The Feather of the Dawn* (1961), and *The Indian Wavers* (1971). However if the love of poetry during her political activity never faded, it is clear that the writing of new poetry books had been subordinated to the nationalist cause. After her baptism as a poet had been blessed by the members of the Rhymers' Club in London ("William Watson, [...] Davidson, [...] Thompson [...], Yeats with his beautiful dreams and songs, Norman Gale, [...] Arthur

Symons, the wonderful boy, with his passionate nature and fiery eyes, all gathered together in the pleasant house of that dearest and most caring of friends and the most unique and brilliant of geniuses, Edm. According to Paranjape, this was a "colonial relationship" (p. xxv), in which Sarojini, a young Indian woman, was subjugated by the fascinating reputation of the "godfather of [her] dreaming girlhood" (p. 62) and the adoring envy mixed with admiration for her friend Symons ("I very much envy you-but that envy is absolutely swallowed up by a greater and more genuine sense of admiratio" According to Anna Snaith, Sarojini poetry should not only be read in a British context as a return to a Western public, but as a "key feature of her emerging feminist nationalism (or a reaction to the contemporary political situation), expressed in various speeches from the early 20th century onwards. While her poetry is constitutive of her later politics, rather than a diversion or even a cause for it "(Snaith 2012: 72).

CONCLUSION

Sarojini Naidu was not a newcomer in the Indian women's movement, as was Margaret

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Cousins, nor a radical activist like Pandita Ramabai, nor a staunch feminist, as she has frequently claimed in her various lectures. Known for her poetry, she was a controversial figure in feminist studies, ambiguously exalting social injustices such as sati and purdah, and the patriarchal status quo of a hierarchical society in which women are subjugated by men. Yet it's fascinating to compare her divisive poetry to her dissonant life experience. She was an emancipated woman: Sarojini, a member of the Brahmin family, married a doctor with an inter-caste; she was educated abroad, in England. She traveled a lot, giving seminars on poetry and politics as well as public speeches. When Gandhi was in jail, she led civil disobedience, engaging regularly in marches, parades, public speeches and the satyagraha movement. She was named President of the National Indian Congress and Chair of the All-India Women's Conference. She served as Uttar Pradesh Governor. She advocated for the education of women, the women's franchise, and the progress of women in society. She wanted Indian women to pursue a different direction from Western-style feminism. She did not

want the gender dispute, but for a shared purpose, mutual cooperation. The poetry of Sarojini has "inner tensions and disputes," and "reproduces her age's inconsistencies and debates" (Paranjape 2012:38). Some of her poems, such as "Suttee" or "Dirge," seem to be praising the exploitation of women while other poems, such as "Purdah Nashin," offer women's status a multifaceted and more nuanced perspective. Nevertheless, the poetry of Sarojini is remarkable for giving voice to the feelings of women, and observations from a different point of view: and the fact that the author who imagines and writes is a woman is capable of succeeding in this poetic goal. Sarojini, frequently criticized in her poetry for being feminine, and not feminist, has the merit of giving voice to subalterns. Certainly, without considering their speeches and political writings, we should not restrict Sarojini's political thinking to her poetry, nor limit the literary study to her verses (Paranjape 2012). Sarojini's poems are aimed not at examining or addressing the real world but at providing a fun escape from reality. Ironically, her best poems are those that reflect a feudal world while those



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ISBN : 978-81-944855-9-9

that are imbued with nationalistic subjects are the more prosaic poems. Her writing can be appraised differently. Gandhi gave her the title of "Bharat Kokila," the "India Nightingale," possibly due to her speeches and not to her verses. As Paranjape puts it, "Her prose is [...] more romantic than some of her prosaic nationalistic poetry" (2012: 66). But there's no sharp discontinuity between her poetry and her political writings, as Snaith observes. The apparent divide between the woman and her poetry is the product of Westernized understanding and point of view. On the contrary, we can interpret her poetry as a forge where she moulded her political-nationalistic and feminist thought – using "feminist" in the same extent Geraldine Forbes uses it, in an "inclusive definition" (see Forbes 2004: 8). In conclusion, we should not restrict our understanding of Sarojini 's poetry with a Westernized feminist model, since in this case we have to accept that patriarchal dominance is not explored in her poetry and oratory. On the contrary, it is interesting to analyse her verses and prose in a post-colonial and subaltern perspective, as they

reproduce the contradictions of her age and the challenges of a subaltern's voice.

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