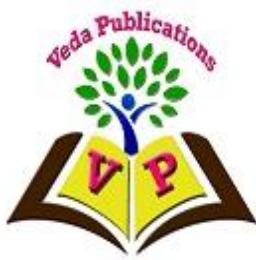


## THE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE OF NATIONALISTIC FERVOUR IN THE VERSE OF SAROJINI NAIDU

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### Abstract

Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) is an Indian poetess in English and politician. She is amongst the pioneer poets of Indo-Anglian literature. Her major themes are nature, love, life and death, folk life, patriotism and mysticism. Her verse collections are- *The Golden Threshold*, *The Bird of Time*, *The Broken Wing*, *The Sceptred Flute* and “*The Feather of Dawn*”. All these collections contain her nationalistic fervour. Especially, *The Golden Threshold* (1905) and *The Bird of Time*: (1912) figure her as a representative of verse culture and an urbane nationalist or a cosmopolitan nationalist. “*Sarojini Naidu’s cosmopolitan nationalism is made possible by her relative privilege, despite her colonized subject position, in education, caste, and class, and by her access to cultural and political institutions both at home and abroad*”.<sup>1</sup> In a speech, the poet remarks that “I came in your midst as a stranger, a wandering singer that had brought to you the message of unity which is the only message today that may be uttered from the lip of man or woman.”<sup>2</sup> Sarojini’s ideals are very lofty for she feels apprehensive not only with her own people but humanity in general. Her poetic output signifies the language and culture of nationalistic fervour.

**Keywords:** *Language, Culture, Verse, Saroji Naidu.*

“She began life as a poet, in later years when the compulsion of events drew into the national struggle, she plunged into it with all the zest and fire she possessed.... whose whole life became a poem and a song and who infused artistry and grace in the national struggle, just as Mahatma Gandhi had infused moral grandeur to it.”

- JawaharLal Nehru

Culture refers to the beliefs, customs, values, and activities of a particular group of people at a particular time. Objects produced by a given culture express these values in both overt and cataleptic way. Works of literature are particularly good indexes of these values, in that they often engage the culture in depth. The verse of Naidu contains these qualities lucratively in relating her thoughts and ideas of patriotism. Motherland zeal and veneration are extreme with Sarojini Naidu, and during her life she was seen struggling with the two equally powerful forces in her nostalgia to sing songs of beauty, love and life, and her urge to serve her country. It is because of this regard towards the country that she forgoes the desire for personal fulfilment and personal life and instead takes up with the impersonal desire to devote herself to her country and her people. This sentiment is shown in “**Lakshmi, The Lotus-Born**”. She prays:

For our dear land do we offer oblation,  
O keep though her glory unsullied,  
unshorn, And guide the principle hope  
of our nation, Hearken, O Lotus-born.

(The Sceptred Flute, P.150)

Sarojini Naidu’s best poems are a magnificent album of Indian life, which illustrate her stylish picturisation of the nation. She sings Songs of India, Indian springs and summers, Indian love lores, the pledges of the sons and daughters of the Mother, Indian streets and bazaars, Indian scenery and sight. Her stance as a poet of Indian life is secular. She has concentrated on all the Major Indian religions – Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, all segments of Indian society and all aspects and modes of life like the Palanquin Bearers, the Corn Grinders, the Wandering singers, the Wandering Beggars, the Indian Dancers, and

the Snake Charmers. Indian Traditions, customs and festivals inhabit a prominent place in her poetry. She also has written about Indian leaders – Gopala Krishna Gokhale and Mahatma Gandhi, and about Indian cities – Delhi and Hyderabad.

Patriotism is not a foremost premise in her poetry but it is the moving spirit behind. Sarojini Naidu's patriotic ardour is expressed in poems like "**To India**", "**An Anthem of Love**", "**The Broken Wing**", "**The Gift of India**" and "**Awake**". This group may also include her memorial poems on national figures such as **i. Memorial Verses: 'Gokhale', ii. The Lotus (To M.K. Gandhi), 'Lokmanya Tilak'**, etc., All of these poems do not evoke patriotism but they are inspired by it. In the poem "**To India**" India is personified as the Mother, who is both ancient and young. Sarojini Naidu addresses her and supplicates her to reinforce from the gloom of slavery and beget new glories from 'thine ageless womb'. There is intense patriotic zeal in the following lines:

Thy Future calls thee with a manifold sound To  
Crescent honours, splendours, victories vast;  
Waken, O slumbering Mother, and be crowned,  
Who once were empress of the sovereign past  
(The Sceptred Flute, p.58)

This poem is composed before the attainment of independence. Sarojini Naidu hopes that India should rise from the bond of slavery as the other slave nations are looking at her with fervent anticipation and expectation and wish Her to lead them in the struggle for freedom. She awakes:

"Mother, O Mother, wherefore dost thou sleep?  
Arise and answer for thy children"

(Ibid)

The poem contains a prophetic note because sometime after its composition India became a free country.

Another poem "**The Gift of India**" venerates the sacrifices of her countrymen. It is a righteous accolade to the valiant Indian soldiers and sons of India. The poem has a raging

world war as its milieu. It is in a form of address by Mother India to the world. Her gentle and insightful soul leaps forward to empathize with the heroes who flaunted their valour on different battlefronts combating for Allied forces. The boundless grief of mother India for her heroic sons, who were killed in alien lands, is mournfully articulated in the poem. The brave sons of India were killed in different climate and in strange lands. Their bodies were buried in ‘alien graves’ without any concern or love or a tear. They attained martyrdom in the World War I (1914-1918). It depicts the chivalry of the Indian soldiers killed on that war and it is a reminder to the world of the brave who fought and fell a prey for the cause of the allies:

Gathered like pearls in their alien graves

Silent they sleep by the Persian waves

(The sceptred Flute p.146)

It is hard to tone down and “measure” the grief and pathos of the mother who is constrained to send her beloved sons to the battle-field in the name of duty, to be killed in war. Her tone gets very pathetic:

Can ye measure the grief of the fears I weep

Or compass the woe of the watch I keep? (Ibid)

A strong note of protest against the imperialists can be seen in the following lines:

And you honour the deeds of deathless ones,

Remember the blood of my martyred sons. (Ibid)

Sarojini wrote this poem to draw the mind of the world to the valiant Indian soldiers who served the Allies in the First World War. This poem was also delivered orally at a meeting of the Hyderabad Ladies’ War Relief Association in December 1915 and is included in her collected speeches. In 2015, the essay “Why the Indian soldiers of World War I were forgotten” was published in the BBC News Magazine. ShashiTharoor writes in that “*Approximately 1.3 million Indian soldiers served in World War One, and over 74,000 of them lost their lives. But history has mostly forgotten these sacrifices, which were rewarded*

*with broken promises of Indian independence from the British government'.... The Indian soldiers who died in the First World War .... gave their 'todays' for someone else's 'yesterdays'. They left behind orphans, but history has orphaned them as well. As Imperialism has bitten the dust, it is recalled increasingly for its repression and racism, and its soldiers, when not reviled, are largely regarded as having served an unworthy cause. But they were men who did their duty, as they saw it. And they were Indians. It is a matter of quiet satisfaction that their overdue rehabilitation has now begun.'*<sup>3</sup> (2 July 2015).

Patriotic note towards the freedom fight and its fighters is found in Naidu's "**The Lotus**", "**Gokhale**", "**LokmanyaTilak**", and "**Imperial Delhi**". In "**The Lotus**" the divine flower becomes a metaphor for the devout persona of Mahatma Gandhi. She addresses Gandhi:

O mystic Lotus, sacred and sublime,  
 In myriad-petalled grace inviolate,  
 Supreme o'er transient storms of tragic Fate,  
 Deep-rooted in the waters of all Time,  
 What legions loosed from many a far-off clime  
 Of wild-bee hordes with lips insatiate.

([www.poetrynook.com/poem/lotus-1](http://www.poetrynook.com/poem/lotus-1))

About this sonnet A.K. Mehrotra one of the renowned poets of Indian English remarks that 'On Gandhi she composed a sonnet, The Lotus, using an implausible metaphor to describe the leader's unique magnetism'. In the memorial poems like "**GOKHALE**", she praises the bravery of the leader:

Heroic Heart! lost hope of all our days!  
 Need'st thou the homage of our love or praise?  
 Lo! let the mournful millions round thy pyre  
 Kindle their souls with consecrated fire  
 Caught from the brave torch fallen from thy hand,  
 To succour and to serve our suffering land,

And in a daily worship taught by thee.

Upbuild the temple of her Unity.

([www.poetrynook.com/poem/memorial-verses-1](http://www.poetrynook.com/poem/memorial-verses-1) )

Gopal Krishna Gokhale told her to employ her poetry and her striking words to rejuvenate the resilience of self-rule in the hearts of villagers. He asked her to use her aptitude to free Mother India.

In the poem “**An Anthem of Love**” Sarojini Naidu pledges her love and patriotism to the nation where the latter is more conspicuous and palpable here. She declares the Indian determine to serve the country as united people. The poet describes the body of patriotism with two hands, two feet, two eyes, two ears but one heart. It is the common aspiration of every Indian to struggle for the freedom of India. She further says:

“One heart are we to love thee, O our mother,  
One undivided, undivisible soul,  
Bound by one hope, one purpose, one devotion  
Towards a great, divinely destined goal.  
(The Sceptred Flute, p13)

The poet announces that Indians love their dear country intensely and they fight for freedom with one heart and one soul.

Sarojini’s poems on the panorama of Indian life celebrate various cultures-Hindu and Muslim lives principally. The theme of religious tolerance and sympathy is not her major poetic concern but it finds magnificent expression in many poems particularly in “**The Call To Evening Prayer**” and “**Awake!**”, where the poem refers to the prayers of Hindu, Muslim, Parsi and Christian creeds and it is a celebration of “The fraternal co-existence of diverse creeds” in a single place:

Allah ho Akbar! Allah ho Akbar!  
From mosque and minar the muezzin are calling  
Allah ho Akbar! Allah hoakbar!

Ave Maria! Ave Maria!

Devoutly the priests at the altars are singing,

Ave Maria! Ave Maria!

Ahura Mazda! Ahura Mazda!

How the sonorous Avesta is flowing!

Ahura Mazda! Ahura Mazda!

Naray'yana! Naray'yana!

Hark to the ageless, divine invocation!

Naray'yana! Naray'yana!

(The Sceptred Flute, p. 136)

In this poem Naidu's political and poetic commitments unite around an apostrophe to a slumbering India. Published in Naidu's last collection, *The Broken Wing*, with a dedication to the Indian nationalist and Muslim leader Mohamed Ali Jinnah(1876–1948). The poem was first 'recited at the Indian National Congress, 1915' held in Bombay where Naidu served as a delegate for the United Provinces. Sheshlatha reddy writes "*The final stanza of the poem appears as a determinedly secularized religious chant with its repetition of sounds through feminine rhymes (crowned thee/surround thee; defend thee/attend thee; avail thee/hail thee); its dactyls ending each line with the measured optimism of a trochee; its reiteration of the call to "Mother"; and the tribute it offers through the objects (flowers, flame, sword, and song) and the sentiments (worship, hope, love, faith, and devotion) it lays before her. The stanza thus telegraphs its orality – it was, after all, written to be "sung" by Naidu*"<sup>4</sup>. It ends with a series of lyric cries:

Hindus: Mother! the flowers of our worship have crowned thee!

Parsis: Mother! the flame of our hope shall surround thee!

Mussulmans: Mother! the sword of our love shall defend thee!

Christians: Mother! the song of our faith shall attend thee!

All Creeds: Shall not our dauntless devotion avail thee? Harken!

O queen and O goddess, we hail thee!

( Broken Wing, p. 13)

Naidu distinguishes India's children by religious type, including Hindus, Parsis, Mussulmans, and Christians, who are separate and yet united in their speech. In the last couplet of the stanza, "All Creeds" sing fused in their desire for their "queen" and "goddess." Their love of Mother India surpasses any communal religious identification even as the religions there in identified constitute the nation.

Naidu produces a cosmopolitan view in her "**Odeto H. H. the Nizam of Hyderabad** (Presented at the Ramzan Durbar)." She addresses the Nizam directly in the poem. She appreciates Nizam in his public political role as ruler of Hyderabad who promoted an ethic of global humanism that posits religious co-existence in Hyderabad as an attainable possibility for the Indian nation. The second stanza enumerates the diverse creeds, including Muslims, Parsis, Hindus, and Christians, that make up the cosmopolitan nature of the city of Hyderabad, in which peaceful multitudes co-exist harmoniously. She praises:

The votaries of the Prophet's faith,  
Of whom you are the crown and chief;  
And they, who bear on Vedic brows  
Their mystic symbols of belief;  
And they, who worshipping the sun,  
Fled o'er the old Iranian sea;  
And they, who bow to Him who trod  
The midnight waves of Galilee.

(**The Golden Threshold, 25**)

Thus for Naidu, cosmopolitanism was not irreconcilable with nationalism. In her poetry as well as in her politics, Naidu endorsed cosmopolitan or urbane nationalism as a standpoint she believed could accommodate both "home and the world." She proclaims this philosophy of a unifying Indian nationalism in a 1903 speech delivered to a group of young Madrassi college men: "I was born in Bengal. I belong to the Madras Presidency. In a



Muhammadan city [Hyderabad] I was brought up and married, and there I lived; still I am neither a Bengali, nor a Madrasi, nor a Hyderabad, but I am an Indian (Cheers), not a Hindu, not a Brahmin, but an Indian to whom my Muhammadan brother is as dear and as precious as my Hindu brother”(Seshlatha Reddy:2010). She favours a nationalism tempered by the demands of global humanism, which takes into consideration interests beyond one’s “own community” and one’s “own self.”

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