



## WOMEN BEFORE FEMINISMS: CONTEXTUALIZING SAROJINI NAIDU

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Article Info:

Article Received:13/04/2015

Revised on: 19/04/2015

Accepted on: 23/04/2015

### ABSTRACT

An immensely successful politician and an earnest patriot, Sarojini Naidu left her career as a poet to serve the nation with complete gusto, especially after she met her political mentor Mahatma Gandhi. Gradually her verses were overshadowed by her achievements as a politician. Even while talking about her verse, barring a few critics, people would talk about her cultivated westernized style and her mature handling of rhythm and meter; completely ignoring the fact that subtly she raised her voice against Patriarchy. Never direct and seldom angry, Naidu's subtlety was the biggest essence of her writing style. The act of writing, at an age, where women were constantly marginalized, is a manifestation of her talent and strength that allowed her to stand on her own even in her political career. Though never overt, her contribution as someone vying for women's liberation is something that needs to be recognized. The paper would contextualize this rare talent of Indian English Poetry, whose talent never came to full realization.

**Key Words:** Patriarchy, Feminisms, Feminists, Heteropatriarchal, Phallogocentric

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### INTRODUCTION

Whenever we think of Feminisms we think of the legendary French Feminists of the 1960s; or Simone De Beauvoir; or at best Virginia Woolf. In that respect, modern day Feminism does not start before the 1920s, especially, if we are to consider Feminism to be an exclusively Western socio-political development. When it comes to Feminism in India, we generally consider literary artists such as Sobha De, Manju Kapur, Kamala Das and various other writers of the post - independence era, who deal exclusively with women and their predicaments within the normative parlance of a heteropatriarchal<sup>1</sup> society. Keeping this situation in

mind, I plan to utilize the space of this research paper to reassess a poet, Sarojini Naidu, whose immensely successful political career has outlived her reputation of being a wonderful poet. Revered for the sacrifices she has made for the country, we tend to remember her as a woman of outstanding sensitivity and resilience. While doing so, we often have a propensity to forget that she was one of the finest English poets of her generation. In his book Indian Writing in English, K R Srinivasa Iyengar writes, "It was as an English poet Sarojini Naidu first caught the attention of the public, but that was only the beginning. In course of time the patriot exceeded the poet, and Sarojini Naidu came to occupy some of the highest unofficial and official positions in the public life of India" (207). It is indeed unfortunate that the poet in her died early, for she did not write anything for the last three and a half decades, as she devoted herself unanimously to

<sup>1</sup> Heteropatriarchal society refers to those societies that tend to be tilted significantly in favour of men and heterosexuals and constantly marginalize women and same-sex people.

politics. Hence, when it comes to the history of feminism in India, we tend to forget her; perhaps because she never overtly talked about women and their problems, like some of the later Indian feminists have done; perhaps because she never popularised the overtly polarising politics of gender that later feminists have delved deep into. Even when people remember her they do so for her style and lyricism. I find it odd that there is a scarcity of literature that recognize the subtle undercurrents of the issues of gender and sexuality that can be found in her poems. Living in a depressing heteropatriachal society women often find it difficult to express themselves. In such a social-set up what else can be more liberating than writing verse? It is because of this reason that I have expressly chosen Sarojini Naidu whose writings must be assessed from a new perspective so that we don't forget a poet in her in order to remember a great politician and an earnest patriot.

#### **Materials and Methods:**

Though Naidu was not overtly a feminist, some of her poems indeed reveal her emotions as a woman. For the purpose of this paper, I have decided to read the subterranean voice of female anxiety with reference to two poems written by Sarojini Naidu— 'Pardah Nashin' and 'Caprice'. While these two poems of diverse nature will be my primary literature; I will be using the Critical tools of study popularised by the Feminist School of Literary Theory in order to substantiate my arguments.

#### **Results and Discussion:**

Unlike many deprived women in India, Sarojini Naidu was privileged to have received education; and that too at some of the top institutes of the world. I do not want to sound naïve by suggesting that Naidu went on to become a successful poet because of her privileged education. However, the fact cannot be ignored that education opens up new vistas of imagination; and that must have been the case for her as well. Born as Sarojini Chattopadhyay in the year 1879, she showed a glimpse of the literary artist she was to become in future when she composed a long narrative poem of about 2000 lines when she was a teenager of merely thirteen. The rebellious spirit in her was also prevalent from a tender age when she had fallen in

love with Dr. Naidu whom she would ultimately go on to marry defying the boundaries of class and caste that existed convincingly during that time. Keeping this biographical information in mind, it will not be wrong to claim that Sarojini Naidu was a woman who did not conform to the narrow ideals of domesticity often associated with women. It is unfortunate, as far as I am concerned that we do not properly assess Naidu as a feminist poet who, in her own way, foregrounded the manifold issues that deprive women.

As mentioned earlier, it would also have to be kept in mind that Sarojini Naidu had received some privileged education. She had come in close contact with some of the most prominent intellectuals of her time such as Arthur Symons, Edmund Gosse, and a few members of the famous Rhymers' club. Iyengar feels that such associations had 'helped her to acquire verbal and technical accomplishment' (207). However, I am of the opinion that such an association must have made her a more prudent individual who would always look forward to expand the vista of her imagination. Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that she was growing up in a period when a gradual voice was developing for the liberation of women. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* had created a furore all across the European world by projecting Nora, the central character and the titular doll, as someone looking for freedom from the narrow constraints of domesticity. In many other literary works, especially in the novels of Hardy (though rather contradictorily<sup>2</sup>), we find the surfacing of the New Woman. The suffragette movement was gradually gaining momentum as well; finally culminating with women of New Zeland gaining voting rights for themselves in the year 1893. Sitting in King's College, London, Sarojini Naidu was not far away from breathing in this non-normative, anti-hegemonic, and anti-patriarchal air that was blowing all across Europe during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The poem in concern, 'Pardah Nashin', is apparently a subtle indictment of how Muslim

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<sup>2</sup> Though we encounter some strong women, like Eustacia Vye, Tess and Sue, in Hardy's novel, they do not, at the end, seem to be able to break the patriarchal status quo.

women are oppressed by the terrible quasi-religious custom of 'Pardah'. Due to my scanty knowledge of Quran Sharif, I will not be moving into the controversial issue of whether (or why) such sartorial hijab is stipulated and prescribed in the religious book of the Muslims. However, from any standpoint—religious or otherwise—the custom of hiding someone's flesh seems to be grossly oppressive. Such a custom, without doubt, is an unabashed patriarchal tradition to keep women under the tab of men. Though the poem was published in the year 1916 (almost a century ago), its relevance is felt even today as women are still maltreated, harassed and even raped; and hence, I have chosen this poem for the purpose of my argument. The poem is an exploration and depiction of the lives of women who are forced to live under the veil. In the Muslim religion, there is apparently a custom that says that women should keep their flesh hidden by wearing a Burqua or a head scarf. Unfortunate though it may seem, we can see the oppressive custom of 'pardah' prevailing for Muslim women till date. Though wearing a specific kind of a dress is a part of the sartorial hijab for Muslim women; symbolic or invisible 'purdah' do exist for women of all religion, class and creed in a country like India till date. These are unseen veils that try to restrain women from the liberty that everyone deserves in a free and a democratic country. Borrowing Derrida's neologism we might call such a society intensely phallogocentric<sup>3</sup>. Through the system of veiling- direct or indirect- women are segregated within the social sphere as the 'inferior other'. Though Simone de Beauvoir's theory has become outdated a bit after the trenchant critique of her work by Judith Butler, some of her theories regarding the social processes that oppress women are still imperative. It was Beauvoir, who, in her monumental study *The Second Sex*, called into question the social processes that relegate women to the margins, and posit them as inferior 'other'. In fact, in the wake of the modern Critical Theory as a field of disciplined anti-hegemonic thinking, the word 'other' has become a metaphor for oppression. In the famous chapter titled 'Myth' of

<sup>3</sup> Phallogocentrism, a neologism coined by Derrida, refers to a world that privileges men.

The *Second Sex* Beauvoir identifies a whole set of myths perpetuated by patriarchal discourses to render women as weak and inferior. Taslima Nasrin, a third world feminist of an extremely radical temperament, also critiques the patriarchal social processes that objectify women and take away their dignity. Within the gamut of a heteropatriarchal society woman become nothing but objects of desire-fulfillment and their role and function within the society is limited within the narrow confines of domesticity. Hence, patriarchy does its best to channelize this discourse through all means possible-especially through literature and art. Kate Millet's legendary PhD thesis where she blatantly criticized Henry Miller's *Sexus* in the opening chapter, by quoting a graphic passage from the book is a remarkable example of how we take the oppression of women for granted, especially when such oppressive forces occur within the domestic sphere. Much before the arrival of such feminists on the western horizon did Sarojini Naidu identify the oppressive social forces that denigrate women.

A close reading of the poem will reveal that Naidu's primary intention was to project Muslim women—and perhaps women in general—as human beings of flesh and blood. The first stanza of the poem makes this very clear:

HER life is a revolving dream  
Of languid and sequestered ease;  
Her girdles and her fillets gleam  
Like changing fires on sunset seas;  
Her raiment is like morning mist,  
Shot opal, gold and amethyst.

Patriarchy often fails to recognize women as creatures of flesh and blood. The use of the images reveals the essential humanity of the woman who is forced to live under the veil. Women, who are always socially conditioned start to believe in their alleged inferiority in the due course of time, fail to recognize the maltreatment that is meted out to them. This inability to judge their condition stems from their lack of proper education. One of the earliest literary feminists Mary Wollstonecraft offered her a vehement critique of the education system which, she felt, was unabashedly biased to men. In her epic study, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, she meant to

promulgate everyone about the naivety surrounding women's education. She writes:

As a class of mankind they have the strongest claim to pity; the education of the rich tends to render them vain and helpless, and the unfolding mind is not strengthened by the practice of those duties which dignify the human character.—They only live to amuse themselves, and by the same law which in nature invariably produces certain effects, they soon only afford barren amusements. (11)

Wollstonecraft also identifies that perils for women are enhanced further as their minds are not strong enough 'to resolutely form its own principle' (13). It is because of their lack of education and access to rational thinking that patriarchy finds it easier to impose their whimsicality on women. Some people call religion a patriarchal metanarrative. I, however, do not subscribe to such a radical standpoint. I am of the opinion that it is the interpreters of religion who perpetuate the 'myths' about womanhood in order to show them weak and helpless. The system of 'pardah' is merely a part of the end-number of myths that surround women, within which, they surely feel encircled.

Many Muslim women wear the veil and the head-gear on their own volition. Since the attack on the Twin towers (9/11) a strong sense of Islamophobia prevails all across the Western world. I am of the opinion that just like no one should be denounced for wearing headscarf or burqa; no one should be forced to wear such things as well. Patriarchy wants the life of a woman to remain a closely guarded secret 'Like jewels in a turbaned crest/ Like secrets in a lover's breast'. Women themselves are unable to unravel the mysteries that surround their lives mostly due to their lack of education; which renders them ineffable to challenge the oppressive patriarchal discourse. This happens, as I showed previously by quoting from Mary Wollstonecraft, because women suffer from a lack of education. In fact, women are often denied access to education as well. Women's inaccessibility to education was brought into the forefront by Virginia Woolf as well in *A Room of One's Own*,

where she associated women's oppression with their lack of financial dependence stemming from their lack of education. In her epoch making study, Woolf also suggests that women are not allowed to think freely. She cites an instance where she herself was denied access to a library which could only be accessed by male scholars. Such an incident reveals how patriarchal institutes try to posit women as inferior others. Being an educated woman Sarojini Naidu, unlike an average woman of her age, was surely able to identify the patriarchal ways that make life miserable for Women in general; and Muslim women in specific.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of 'pardah' is rather opprobrious, to say the least. In a typical heteropatriarchal social order men are supposed to be strong and protective and women are supposed to be weak and looking for protection. 'Pardah' seems to be a prop in this whole drama protection. For a man, woman, like much other valuable stuff, is a possession. We often criticize Muslim religion for the way it asks women for the way it asks women to keep their true identity behind the closet. However, in a country like India where women are still treated like sex objects, invisible 'pardahs' remain everywhere. It is such closets that clearly distinguish the roles assigned to men and women. While men are often granted a rather dynamic and political space; women's position is defined through negatives. One of the most dangerous imaginations of patriarchy is that women are 'femme fatale'- someone who can lure men into their grasp. It is unfortunate but true that many political leaders- both right-wing and left-wing- feel that women are physically and sexually harassed because of their seductive nature. Instead of changing men, they advise women to wear 'decent' clothes so that their sartorial appearance does not insinuate men. Such an opinion regarding women reveals how women are still treated as objects of men's desire. Using a phrase used by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick we might call women's desires and wishes to be the 'epistemology of the closet' which are snubbed at every level of the society. The ultimate liberating comes from Sarojini Naidu in the last stanza of the poem when she hopes that 'time' will 'lift the curtain unaware'

as women, irrespective of their class, caste and religion, will find a less obnoxious world to live in.

Caprice, a work of rare beauty, is a poem of a different kind. Written in a first person narrative voice, the poem is perhaps a rendition of Sarojini Naidu's own feelings and emotions. As I mentioned earlier, Sarojini Naidu was active at a time when very few women could express their troubles-let alone the act of writing verse in English. The use of the subjective 'my', in the poem lends, an element of honesty to this poem. As I discussed previously in this paper, Naidu defied the social convention to marry a certain Dr. Naidu. Apparently she had quite a happy married life. No biographer has identified any trouble or crisis as far as her married life is concerned. However, if we are to go by this poem, then, we get to know about a troubled soul whose heart has been inflicted by someone whom she held very dearly to her heart:

You held a wild flower in your fingertips,  
Idly you pressed it to indifferent lips,  
Idly you tore its crimson leaves apart  
Alas! it was my heart.

You held a wine-cup in your fingertips,  
Lightly you raised it to indifferent lips,  
Lightly you drank and flung away the bowl

...

Alas! it was my soul.

Even a cursory glance at the poem reveals the undercurrent of pathos that runs throughout it. The use of the words such as 'idly', 'indifferent', 'tore', 'alas', 'flung away' reveal the sense of negativity associated with the speaker. As I showed in my analysis of the previous poem, an invisible 'pardah' surrounds the life of a woman and that makes their lives an unbearable nightmare. Within such a narrow, discursive space women have no way to express their voice. By expressing her feelings and emotions with ease and comfort, Sarojini Naidu is indeed doing a revolutionary work. Though it is not an overstatement of feminist issues, the poem fulfils a remarkable function by replacing the dominant patriarchal discourse with a much more sensitive voice of a lovelorn woman. From that respect the subjective rendering of the female psyche predates the confessional poems of Kamala Das.

'Caprice' deals with the way a woman's soul is tortured by the indifference showed to her by her male counterpart. What strikes me is the fact that the female poet, perhaps unconsciously, objectifies herself by comparing herself first with a flower and then with a wine-cup. The sad reality lies in the fact that though almost hundred years have passed by many women still encounter the same destiny as encountered by the poetic persona in this poem. The use of the phrase- 'indifferent lips'- is perhaps the most startling one. In a heteropatriarchal society, as I discussed earlier, women are treated as objects of male fantasy. When the emotional dependence gradually starts to fade away, what remains is the urge for physical gratification. While fulfilling these urge men often fail to recognize what women want from them. When a relationship becomes taken for granted, what remains is indifference. Being able to lead a much more public life compared to women, men seldom realize that many women's true happiness, unfortunately, but truly, lies in their effort to see a happy married life. The idea that women are maltreated by their male counterparts was brought into light most prominently and in the most startling manner by Kamala Das much later in the century. In 'The Old Playhouse', for instance, Kamala Das writes:

...You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you  
poured Yourself into every nook and cranny,  
you embalmed My poor lust with your  
bitter-sweet juices. You called me wife, I  
was taught to break saccharine into your  
tea and To offer at the right moment the  
vitamins. Cowering Beneath your onstrous  
ego I ate the magic loaf and Became a warf.  
I lost my will and reason, to all your  
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies...

The tone of both Naidu and Das's poem seems to be of the same tune. They are both being extremely candid about the emotional roadblock that their relationships have encountered. Sarojini Naidu, in no way, is as robust and candid as Kamala Das when it comes to narrating about women's experience. However, as far as I am concerned Naidu deserves more attention from critics and scholars alike for giving voice to women at a time when the world was exclusively phallogocentric.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Sarojini Naidu is a poet of great importance as far Indian poetry in English is concerned. Though mainly praised for her artistic sensibility rather than her thematic concerns, Sarojini Naidu, deserves more critical attention as a poet; for she wrote as a woman, without a pseudonym, before Feminism gained currency as a holistic socio-political movement even in the West. The paper, I hope, has been able to throw some new light on a part of her body of work. While doing so, I hope, I have also been able to show her as someone who subverted Patriarchy not merely through her act of writing and political engagements but also through her choice of subject matter as well.

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