

Sarojini Naidu the Nightingale of India: Singing the Songs of Glory, Liberty and Justice for Women

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Abstract

Sarojini was a reformist through and through; she was a source of energy, enlightenment and inspiration for men and women equally. Similarly, she gave equal impetus to both – freedom for country and freedom for women. Sarojini actively participated in women-oriented programmes, held a number of meetings and visited girls' colleges all over India. Sarojini directed her attention towards child marriage, widow remarriage, women's education, polygamy and social injustice done to women. Sarojini also wrote three volumes of poems to depict the various dimensions in a woman's life mostly their plight. She contributed to women's cause mainly through her speeches and her visionary mind. Sarojini openly criticized the social evils of the time, more intelligently in the case of women. In order to elevate womankind education is the most essential requisite; only an educated woman can be well-informed as well as well-awakened. So, Sarojini's focus too was to establish new and strengthen the present education system such that it should equip women to aid them in attaining freedom for both themselves and the nation. In this paper, I propose to present the manner in which Sarojini raised the spirit of freedom in women and shook men out of their narrow beliefs towards women. A number of speeches delivered by Sarojini Naidu to men and women in the course of the freedom struggle, alongwith her poems have been employed to prove that she understood the grave issues related to Indian women, and had the spark to show people what womanhood truly stands for.

Among other responses to world literature, perhaps, the earliest most diverse and most intense responses from Indians have been towards feminism. Feminism has been defined by the *Merriam and Webster Dictionary* as "the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes or an organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests." The feminist movement was stimulated by Mary Wollstonecraft and has been continuing from then to the post-modern era; now it is mostly known as post-feminism. *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792, was acclaimed by Winifred Holtby as "the bible of the women's movement in Great Britain" (*Women and a Changing Civilization* 8). In this book, Wollstonecraft has made evident that masculine and feminine are relative and fictional terms; two ideologies or words which have been conceptualized and executed by communities since ages. She renders a special term bugbear to, "masculine" ("Vindication" 9), and it is so because masculinity is associated with reason, ambition, rationality, dominance, intelligence, and physical strength; even these virtues are societal rather than natural.

Wollstonecraft further argues that the mind and soul is neither solely masculine nor solely feminine. And it is, the “desire of being always women”, rather than being human in the first place, which is the “very consciousness that degrades the sex” (Wollstonecraft, “Vindication” 103). She demands from the women to either resign themselves to the tag of weak, submissive, irrational and inferior beings, and eventually to “become objects of contempt”, or to behold themselves as “rational creatures”; as individuals who have sensibility, skin-deep beauty, expertise, and who are not meant only to be flattered. (Wollstonecraft, “Vindication”8-35). She argues that this fictionalized weakness and inferiority attributed to women has executed power over the minds of women, through literature as well as through their mothers:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain from them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives. (“Vindication”19)

Wollstonecraft encourages the women to despise the practice of demeaning themselves by employing their bodies and ‘sweet attractive grace’. Instead she urges that women ‘must return to nature and equality’, and actualize their true identity ‘by reforming themselves to reform the world’. (“Vindication”19-47)

Myers illuminates us with his opinions on Wollstonecraft:

Wollstonecraft’s reviews ‘both discuss and stylistically enact a politics of change, an attempt to unite a spontaneity of affect with a morality of reason’, proposing a non-gendered human subject who integrates emotional and intellectual faculties, and whose reading is vitally connected to action. Feminist literary criticism is thus presented as a ‘liberating intellectual perspective – a political act, aimed not just at interpreting the world but at changing it through changing the consciousness of readers’ (*Children’s* n.pag.).

George Eliot too, while praising Wollstonecraft’s accomplishment on providing the fair sex an utterly new line of thought and action, publicizes her thoughts regarding intellectual emancipation for both sexes: ‘we want freedom and culture for woman, because subjection and ignorance have debased her, and with her Man; for – “If she be small, slight-natured, miserable,/How shall men grow?”’ (*Leader* n.pag.).

While exploring the realm of Indian traditions, customs, and patterns of behavior with regard to Indian women, it has been found that along with the trap laid for women globally, Indian women are trapped within multiple webs that are deeply rooted in our culture and social system. In Europe, women had to strive to attain education, suffrage, reproductive choice, individuality and equal status with

men. This also proves that gender is a societal concept as every society propagates a different understanding of the masculine and feminine code of conduct, according to its histories, myths, expectations and norms. India has written back to the West, revolted at the singularizing of Third World Feminism; for not considering the differences between the situation and the plight of Indian women. Exemplifying the glory of the Indian woman, Sarojini Naidu set a perfect picture of a free Indian woman: free from the chains of the deep-rooted patriarchal system, free from the confinement of the walls built by the narrow-minded society, free from the conflict which takes place within a woman when she tries to think; behave and act like an individual. Mrs. Naidu, through her active participation in women's emancipation, in the freedom struggle, and through her poems, presented herself as a true Nightingale; singing the song of liberty at three levels—individual, society and nation. The manner in which Naidu dealt with her personal problems; problems related to the consummation of her love, and socializing her unconventional and untraditional marriage with Govindarajula in such a conservative era, she gave the nation a very definitive message. The message was that a woman, that too an Indian woman, can stand for her personal rights and win with courage and determination. Sarojini directed her attention towards child marriage, widow remarriage, women's education, polygamy and social injustice done to women. She called upon the women folk to break their chains and come to the forefront to explore their talents and skills in various professions. The majority of men and women were prisoners of their narrow mind-set; nevertheless, Sarojini's dynamic personality shook them out of their dream worlds. She asked the people to awaken for the sake of their country and humanity as a whole, and she performed this task with absolute love and compassion. She contributed to the women's cause mainly through her speeches and her visionary mind. Sarojini openly criticized the social evils of the time, especially in relation to women.

In 1906, at the Indian Social Conference on the Education of Women in Calcutta, on the subject of "female education", she declaimed:

India, of all places, which at the beginning of the first century was already a great civilisation, had contributed to the world's progress, radiant examples of women of the highest genius and widest culture. But by some irony of evolution the paradox stands to our shame. It is time for us to consider how best we can remove such a reproach, how we can achieve something more fruitful than the passing of empty resolutions in favour of female education from year to year? (*Charismatic* 45-46)

She strongly felt that the whole freedom struggle should involve or deal with issues related to women on a parallel basis. She was full of remorse for the lack of unanimity in favour of the indispensability of female education. Naidu states indignantly:

Does one man dare to deprive another of his birthright of God's pure air which nourishes his body? How then shall a man dare to deprive a human soul of its immemorial

inheritance of liberty and life? And yet my friends, man has so argued in the case of Indian woman. That is why you men of India are what you are; because your fathers, in depriving your mothers of the immemorial birthright, have robbed you, their sons, of your just inheritance. Therefore I charge you to restore to your women their ancient rights, for I have said it is we and not you, who are the real nation builders, and without our active co-operation at all points of progress all your congresses and conferences are in vain. (*Charismatic* 46)

In 1918, Jullunder, Naidu addressed the students of the *Kanya Maha Vidyalaya*, and highlighted the need for women's education, saying:

Your Vice-principal has made an eloquent and stirring appeal in the cause of women's education and revealed that in Punjab even to this day, there is prejudice and bigotry against female education. The narrow-minded people say that the education of women is to be condemned because it makes them bold. Brothers, have you forgotten the heroic stories and scriptures of your Motherland? It was the privilege of India to possess women who were bolder and braver than their brothers. For the amelioration of a country the co-operation of both sexes is necessary... You demand political rights... Pray do not forget that a lame person can walk but slowly, a one-eyed man sees only on one side and that a carriage with one wheel cannot move properly." And turning to the problem of Muslim women, she said, "The purdah system did not mean...purdah on the mind and purdah on the soul, and she ended, Break open the cage of bigotry—the liberty of the soul will be India's share only when woman is free." (*Charismatic* 62)

In April she spoke in Lahore on the topic, "National Education of Women." This time she addresses men and tries to raise in them a sense of responsibility and says vehemently, "You talk of Indian womanhood, you talk of the courage and devotion that took Savitri to the very realms of death to win back her husband's soul, yet to the Savitris of today you deny that power to win back the national life from the depths of death" (*Charismatic* 81). In September she moved the resolution on "Equal Qualifications between Men and Women" at a special Congress meeting in Bombay. The resolution said, "Women possessing the same qualifications as are laid down for men in any part of the scheme shall not be disqualified on account of sex" and at the Provincial Conference at Bijapur she moved a resolution on "Women's Franchise" (*Charismatic* 81).

Naidu had a unique vision regarding the future of Indian women which she shared while opening the tenth session of 'Madras constituency of the All-India Women's Conference held at the National Girls' High School, Madras on the 19th October 1935:

The highest benediction I can give you at your Conference is that you may yourself, of your own action, vision, strength,

wisdom and courage, expedite the day when women's organisations in India will go grandly to their resting place, because Indian women will have once again resumed the great and noble destiny of being the half of the nation and the half that leads the vanguard of progressive measures of life... (*Women's* 103)

Naidu, in the course of her speech, incites the women of India to come out of their veils and stand for the rights of the country in addition to fighting for their own rights. Speaking of herself, Naidu says that she was one of those heterodox persons who never believed— she hoped they would never believe either that the women's movement was an isolated thing "that had to be supported, fostered, nursed and given tonics to run soundly" (*Women's* 105).

Presenting Ruskin's "Seven Lamps of Architecture" as a defining symbol for Indian women, Naidu declares:

I do not know of any that is more symbolic than the "Seven Lamps of Architecture" of Ruskin. But we have seven hundred thousands of lamps in the architecture unlighted because you have refused to give them the things that kindle the flame. If the "Seven Lamps of Architecture" illumine the whole civilization of the West, friends, think of the dazzling illumination that shall light the whole world with a conflagration and radiance that cannot be quenched when the 700,000 lamps in our national structure are lit for the glory of humanity. I am only one little lamp of clay. But there are thousands of lamps of gold hidden away for want of opportunity. Instead of thanking you for this, I should reproach you for being content with lamps of clay when there are lamps of gold. Let me beseech you not to be content with such small ideals as are represented by any successes that I may have achieved. India will not be great with her ancient greatness. It is only in your hands to give the illumination and it is only by that illumination that we can wake up our sleeping mother. (*Great* 34-35)

Addressing the men of India, Naidu demands from them to reflect their humanity and give women their due position:

I still claim that sex, so far from being a disqualification to a primal right of franchise, is a human right and not a monopoly of only one sex. I put it before you not from practical consideration, not from economic consideration, but rather from the standpoint of the National ideal of India. We Indians have always boasted that we were followers of the Goddesses of our land. Our teachings always inculcated the worship of the mother even before the worship of the father. What is the psychology and interpretation of that inculcation, of that doctrine, of that practice? Woman makes the Nation, on her

worthiness or unworthiness, weakness or strength, ignorance or enlightenment, her cowardice or courage lies folded in the destiny of her sons. Shall it be said by any law of biology, physiology, psychology or any logic that the woman can go down into the valley of eternal shadow and be made irresponsible for the future of a country? Is it possible, is it rational? I ask you. Does the duty of a woman end with the physical agony that she endures for the sake of her sons? Are you not aware that in every Indian house, it is the woman that is the centre of life waiting for the dawn? She is the servant of the household; she is the daily sacrifice, every day of her life of her labours, of her love and devotion to the family. Then being the servant of the family, being the high priestess of the home, being the true legislator of the destinies of India, is it logical I ask you, is it worthy of you to say that she shall face death with no courage to face life, that she shall sacrifice for the sustenance of the family within the walls of her home and yet be not afforded that primal right which is as much hers as it is yours, because she is co-responsible with you for the honour and prosperity of your country?... I do not think that any male need have apprehension that to extend the horizon of woman's labours is to break all her power in the home. I do not think that there need be any apprehension that in granting franchise to Indian womanhood, that Indian womanhood will wrench the power belonging to man. (*Great* 57-58)

Finally, Naidu comes to the core value of most of the feminist thought and movement—men must share equal rights and status with women to keep the world going smoothly, lovingly and intelligently. She makes men realize their duties towards women:

Man ought to share with woman all his rights. He should remember the immutable principle that woman has equal rights with man. Her right is slumbering, is almost in a moribund condition, but it has to be revived. Man must recognize that he and the woman come to the door of death to create a nation. Like the right of man hers is also the right to see how her nation shall uphold its honour. Remember that it is for the honour of the nation that the Indian womanhood day after day comes to the gate of death, so that the Indian people may be born a million time free. (*Great* 62)

A brilliant orator and spokesperson, Sarojini was foremost a poetess—so beautiful and musical her poems were that she is called the Nightingale of India. In her poems, we can discover a huge variety of feminine experience and shades. Some of her poems also depict the pain and social evils women have to suffer. Her three significant collections of poems are—*The Golden Threshold*, *The Bird of Time*, and *The Broken Wing*. Feminine experience, feminine psychology as well as feminine behavior are diffused over the poems in the mentioned

collections. "Suttee" depicts one of the most pre-dominant evils prevailing in the Indian society of the nineteenth century – Sati. According to this system it was mandatory for the wife to burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband irrespective of the age or the will of the wife. The poem reflects a wife who, in an anguished state, is compelled to prove her devotion and faithfulness. In the last stanza, the wife lays bare her heart:

Life of my life, Death's bitter sword
Hath severed us like a broken word,
Rent us in twain who are but one
Shall the flesh survive when the soul is gone?

"Vasanta Panchami", sings about a popular Hindu festival, which celebrates the advent of spring. On this auspicious day, maidens and married women wear yellow clothes, adorn themselves, light lamps and make offerings of new-grown corn to the goddess Spring. Amongst all the festivity, Sarojini portrays the agony of widows in addition to the brutality of the dogma associated with widowhood. Like all other widows, Lilavati is refrained from celebrating any festival, furthermore, she is forbidden to even be present at the celebration. For her, spring's arrival is a cause of sorrow and grimness, so she laments at the feast in the following lines:

Go, dragon-fly, fold up your purple wing,
Why will you bring me tidings of the spring?
O lilting koels! Hush your rapturous notes,
O dhadikulas! Still your passionate throats,
Or seek some further garden for your nest...
Your songs are poisoned arrows in my breast.

Thus, we see how issues like the demand for the strengthening of women on political, economic and legal front; eradication of social evils such as child marriage, early widowhood and female infanticide, as well as participation in the freedom struggle were the major issues Sarojini Naidu gave her heart and soul to. She propagated that the path of education is the most appropriate key to women's emancipation, in addition to respecting and acknowledging the biological, psychological and spiritual difference between men and women. This could save them from the drudgery in the household along with seeing afresh their personal and professional lives. One of the most important messages that Naidu gave to Indian men was that one educated woman can handle the public and private affairs of the family, as well as educate the present and future generations.

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