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## Sarojini Naidu: A Traditional Multiculturalist

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### **Abstract:**

Sarojini Naidu was one of the most prolific authors in Indian writing. Besides being an Indo-Anglican poet, she was a socialist, political activist, and a freedom fighter. Practically, she was a multidimensional figure who championed from literature to education and from politics to social reform. These multipurpose activities enabled her to come in contact with different cultures and subcultures. As a cosmopolitan nationalist, she always believed in multiculturalism. Her family education, upbringings, and her association with some eminent personalities like Mahatma Gandhi, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Rabindranath Tagore, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. Sarbapalli Radhakrishnan, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad who, in their thoughts and activities were national as well as international figures, helped her a lot in giving rise to a strong faith in cultural diversity. And these elements of cultural plurality have found expression in her different works—her poems, speeches, letters etc. Her familial background, her education also plays an important role. In our present century, on the canvas of multilayered cross-cultural diaspora, Naidu's multiculturalism is a very relevant issue. Here in this dissertational treatise, I shall endeavour to make an exploration on how, where, and to what extent, Naidu used her faith in cultural amalgamation. My objective is to find out Sarojini as a forerunner of modern cultural theory and thus to show her relevance on the present socio-cultural context. Sarojini deserves more critical attention; for she wrote before multiculturalism gained currency as a holistic socio-political movement even in the west. Another motivation is to show the far reaching impact of her cultural heterogeneity in the making of a better human society.

**Keywords: Multiculturalism, Cultural Hegemony, Internationalism, Cosmopolitanism, Indianness.**

Today multiculturalism is a widespread topic in contemporary political philosophy. It is a phenomenon with long history. Its systematic study has only flourished in the late twentieth century especially from liberal philosophers. The theorists see culture from different dimensions. Now there are five prevalent concepts- semiotic, normative, societal, economic/rational choice, and the anti-essentialist cosmopolitanism. In this paper, I would contextualize such a woman writer who reigned in a period much earlier than all these happenings. Still, it is surprising to think that she had the sensibility towards this comprehensive outlook of encompassing all the religious, ethnic and cultural multiplicities in the prevalent society. From this point of view, she was surely a Multiculturalist but neither she nor other litterateurs overtly described her as such. And that multiculturalism did not find currency at her time may be a positive reason behind it. And here I must refer to the fact that there is the scarcity of literature where we may find this fold of her multidimensional personality. Her writings need to be reevaluated so that we may remember her not only as a poet and patriot but also as a social and political thinker who very successfully gave placement to religious and cultural multiplicity in her poetry and non-fictional

prose. Practically, Sarojini Naidu was a traditional Multiculturalist, a forerunner of modern multicultural literary theories.

In the beginning, it should be noted that western multiculturalism is a recent phenomenon that portrays a resistance against cultural hegemony, a search for the identity and recognition of difference. It is a body of thought in political philosophy, an umbrella term closely associated with 'identity politics', the politics of difference. It is also a matter of economic interest and political power. But Naidu's multiculturalism is of difference. Practically, she was born and brought up at a time when multiculturalism did not come as a movement at all. In Naidu's work, it is an accepted way of life. It is more assimilatory than the subversive. This may be described as traditional multiculturalism characterized by Indianness. On the context of India's socio-cultural scenario, this is Naidu's use of Indian culture which is an amalgamation of the diverse subcultures spread all over Indian subcontinent and handed down from remote past. In spite of the cultural, religious, social and geographical differences, there seems to be an integration which is often called a 'unity in diversity'. Indian identity is a confluent identity which is aware of the differences and at the same time maintains its own integrity.

Here in this context, the wise counsel of Sarojini's literary mentors-Arthur Symons (a member of the Rhymer's Club) and Edmond Gosse may be a relevant reference. In the 'Introduction' of the collection of poems-*The Bird of Time: Songs of Life, Death and the Spring* (1912), Edmund Gosse has given Naidu a friendly advice to stoop to Indianness both in thought and expression. He says:

"... I entreated Sarojini to write no more about robins or skylarks, in a landscape of our Midland countries, with the village bells somewhere in the distance calling the parishioners to church, but to describe the flowers, the fruits, the trees, to set her poems firmly among the mountains, the gardens, the temples to introduce to us the vivid populations of her own voluptuous and unfamiliar province; in other words, to be a genuine poet of the Deccan, not a clever machine-made imitator of the English classics."

Very soon Sarojini acted upon this suggestion. She also indulged with enthusiastic gratitude the friend Arthur Symons, a vibrant member of the Rhymer's Club who showed her the way to the Golden threshold. Sarojini springs from the very soil of India. Although she employs English language as a vehicle, but her spirit has no other tie with the west. It addresses itself to the exposition of emotions which are tropical and primitive. The seed of multiculturalism was in her blood. She was born in an interesting, diverse family that was one of the centres of every kind of intellectual adventurism and freethinking in Hyderabad. Though Bengali, the Chattopadhyays' cultural and linguistic affiliations were eclectic; at home, the parents spoke Bengali to each other but Hindustani to the children and Telegu to the servants. The atmosphere in which she grew up is known for its unconventionality, utter lack of prejudice, and openness of attitude. In the words of Sarojini, we can trace her father, Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya to be a Multiculturalist. His father was a great man a D.Sc. from the University of Edinburgh but his life had been a grand failure. In a letter to Arthur Symons (Paranjape, Sarojini Naidu: *Selected Letters*), Sarojini wrote, "He has wasted all his money on two great objects: to help others and on alchemy. He holds huge courts every day in his garden of all the learned men of all religions—Rajahs and beggars and saints and downright villains all delightfully mixed up, and all treated as one."

Sarojini's multiculturalism is different from that of the west. It is Indianised traditional multiculturalism which is in force from long past. India is culturally, linguistically, religiously, and to a large extent, ethnically one of the most diverse, if not the only diverse, country of the world. Its culture has been shaped by its long history, unique geography, and diverse demography. India's language, religion dance, music architecture and custom differ from place to place within country, but nevertheless possess a commonality. There is an existence, acceptance and promotion of multiple cultural traditions within a single jurisdiction. Indian multiculturalism is an amalgamation of the diverse subcultures spread all over the Indian subcontinent and this tradition is several millennia old.

Sarojini Naidu, the 'Bharatiya Kokila', as Mahatma Gandhi described her 'the Nightingale of India' as she is often called, took up this culture and tradition and successfully used them in her works. Now for the purpose of our discussion, we may turn our notice to some of her canonical works where we may have successful enactment of the elements of cultural plurality. Sarojini was a successful integrationist of multireligious sensibilities and in manipulating them in many of her poems successfully. In a poem *The Call to Evening Prayer* (TBT), we see how brilliantly she uses elements of Hindu, Muslim, Parsee, Christian sensibilities which conspicuously give the suggestion of her liking and propagation for communal harmony and cosmopolitanism. The poem begins with the Islamic prayer:

. Allah O Akbar Allah O Akbar  
 . From the mosque and minar the muezzins are calling  
 . Pour forth your praises, O chosen of Islam;

It is the evening prayer. 'Swiftly shadows of sunset are falling.' The Christians are calling 'Ave Maria! Ave Maria!' The priests are devotionally singing at the altars of Jesus Christ, the son of the virgin. The Parsees are praying 'Ahura Mazda! Ahura Mazda!' and the sonorous 'Avesta is flowing.' Bending low the devout Parsees are making obeisance to flame and light. Lifting the voices in rapt adoration, the Hindu devotees whom Sarojini describes as 'children of Brahma' lift up their hands and invoke the mantra of Naray'ana! Naray'ana!

Here in this poem, different faiths, cultures are brought together in the bond of unity. Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsees all worship with equal love and devotion. Sarojini visualizes India as the divine mother who bestows her blessings on all her children, be they Hindus, or Muslim, Parsees, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs or Christians or any other creed. *Kali, the Mother*, another poem from the verse collection *The Broken Wing*, portrays maidens, brides, mothers, widows, artisans, peasants, victors, scholars, priest poets, and patriots all praising and worshipping the mystic mother 'Kali'. Every one of them pays the heartiest tribute at the lotus feet of the divine goddess. And in the end:

All Voices: All glory and all grace we bring to thee,  
 Kali! Maheshwari! (22)

*Kali, the Mother* and *Awake* are nationalistic poems. Like *The Prayer of Islam*, the first poem maintains a litany of some of the names of Shakti, the great, composite female goddess of Hinduism. The invocation is to harmonize all the sections of Indian society. Here the mother is

also the Mother India. Sarojini invokes this idea, the secular goal of nationalism to religious symbolism in the tradition of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Sri Arobindo. *Awake* shows all the children of Mother India, separately first as ‘Hindus’, ‘Parsees’, ‘Mussulmans’, ‘Christians’, then as ‘All Creeds’ kneeling before her to demonstrate their united resolve to serve her:

Hindus:                 Mother! the flowers of our worship have crowned thee!  
 Parsees:                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?  
 .                         Hearken! O queen and O goddess, we hail thee! (13-18)

The poem reflects mysticism based on Hindu mythology. There are a number of poems from different verse collections which show Naidu’s Hindu consciousness. *The Flute Player of Brindaban (The Sceptred Flute)* is a poem that exhibits the divine flute player Krishna who lures every heart away from mortal cares and attachments. *Songs of Radha, the Milkmaid (TSF)* is a poem written in Bhakti cult. Human love has been transmuted and transcended into a platonic love. The devotee, in search of the infinite, intends to dispense with mundane pleasures:

Still must like a homeless bird  
 Wander, forsaking all;  
 The earthly loves and worldly lures  
 That held my life in thrall,  
 And follow, follow, answering  
 Thy magical flute-call.( 7-12)

This is the poem which introduced Naidu to the famous English critic James H. Cousins who was highly impressed by the chanting effect of ‘Govinda! Govinda!’ *Village Songs* is another poem which is the expressive of the real, mystical, mythical and spiritual.

It is quite natural that as a Brahmin girl, Sarojini will be sensitive to Hindu religious sentiments. But she was the gracious lady, who sitting in that colonial India, could go beyond the narrow wall of caste, creed, or religion. She was very sensitive towards Islam. Her Islamic faith has found expression in various poems, letters and speeches. The poem *The Imam Bara* and *A song from Siraj (TBW)* are a part of a group of Lucknow poems all of which are Shiah in spirit. *The Imam Bara* describes the Imam Bara of Lucknow which is a chapel of lamentation where Shiah community celebrates the tragic martyrdom of Ali, Hassan, and Hussain during the mournful month of Moharram.

Hark, from the brooding silence  
 Breaks the wild cry of pain  
 Wrung from the heart of the ages  
 Ali! Hassan! Hussain! (9-12)

Both the poems are charged and compressed in language and imagery, making them almost prophetic in manner. Ali was the son -in-law, and Hassan and Hussain, the nephews of the prophet Mohammad. They were assassinated in a struggle for succession after the latter's death. Their deaths are mourned each year by the Shiah during Moharram. The first of the two 'Memorial Verses', 'Ya Mahbub' mourns the death of Mir Mahboob Ali Khan on whom Sarojini already published a poem, *Ode to H.H. the Nizam of Hyderabad* in *The Golden Threshold*. The poem approvingly evokes a picture of Hyderabad as a 'magic kingdom'; fabulous and glamorous like the old Baghdad of Harun-al-Rashid. *Wandering Beggars* like *The Old Woman* has a muslim refrain "Y' Allah! Y' Allah!" She prays, 'La ilaha illa-I-Allah/ Muhammad-ar-Rasul-Allah.' The beggars are romanticized as a fearless and free band, instead of being poor wretched. The sentiments that Sarojini makes them utter are more suitable to those sannyasis and fakirs who have voluntarily embraced poverty than to beggars. *The Prayer to Islam* is another Islamic poem of Naidu. Here the desire of the devotees to have communion with the Almighty has been expressed. Five pairs of ninety nine names of Allah are celebrated here. The names are Hameed: 'one to whom all praise is due'; :Hafeez: 'the protector'; Ghani: 'the beautiful' ; Ghaffar: 'the forgiver'; Wahab: 'the bestower' ; Waheed: 'the unique' ; Quadeer: 'the Almighty; Quavi: 'the powerful' ; Rahman: 'the merciful' ;Raheem: 'the compassionate.'

Other poems which also reflect Sarojini's love and respect for Muslim culture are *The Hussain Saagar* (TBT) *The Fairy Isle of Janjira* (TBT), *Nightfall in the City of Hyderabad* (TGT) etc. Sarojini's projection of cultural plurality can be found in those poems in which she catches hold of India's folk tradition. The folk songs of Sarojini Naidu breathe the spirit of India and it is in these songs that the heart of India is laid bare. Her vision of life is predominantly Indian in its scope and implications. The folk culture is not limited to one particular religion. It is a synthesis of diverse cultures which adds to its timelessness. There is no demarcation in religious festivals. They are often jointly organized which shows the strength of the Indian folk tradition. In different poems belonging to this stream, Sarojini unites multiple cultures into a harmonizing whole. Her poems are expressive of her care and attention for the working class people, who by dint of hard labour earn their livelihood—the corn-grinders, the weavers, the bangle sellers, the coromandel fishers, the snake charmer. Naidu is caring and respectful to their profession, activities and work culture. The bangle -sellers in the poem of the same name from *The Bird of Time* are the impoverished and marginalized group of people. The bangles they sell are of religious and symbolic value. No widow is permitted to wear bangle. Another offshoot of Indian folk songs is associated with Radha Krishna myth. The maiden Radha is hypnotized by the eternal flute-player Krishna who lures every heart away from mortal cares and attachments. The singers in *Wandering Singers* are beyond the matrix of time and place. To them, "All men are kindred, the world is our home." The famous critic B.S. Mathur makes a beautiful comment on this poem. He depicts Sarojini Naidu as a poet who was "filled with unlimited patriotism that is synonymous with internationalism". (1977, 66). *The corn Grinders* tell about the equality of all forms of lives, animals, birds, human beings. The folk –singers do not grumble about the hardship of life. The palanquin bearers bear the burden sportingly. The corn-grinders accept challenging tasks; the Indian-weavers deal with the transitoriness of human life. The dramatis personae in Naidu's poems have their own philosophy, own culture and thus Sarojini treats different faiths, and way of life always maintaining an idiosyncrasy. But overall through folk-songs, the poet conveys the message of equality and unity of life. Sarojini Naidu is making a



unification of all these cultures into a single harmonizing force which may be called patriotism or love for India.

Sarojini Naidu is vocal about the harmonious peaceful coexistence of people of different cultures, subcultures, religion, faiths, customs living in India from long past under the same canopy of unity. In her speech on Women's Education and the Unity of India, she said, "...we are the children of tomorrow! I am proud to belong to a generation whose privilege is to sow the seeds of that ultimate unity." Sarojini believed that India, as a nation, possesses a wizard element that can reconcile, harmonize, and bind together different races, religions, castes, creeds, cultures etc. Underneath the apparent diversities, there is always an undercurrent of unity that harmonizes all superficial variations. With a prophetic insight Sarojini recognizes the glory in that underlying indestructible brotherhood which will burn the dross of all deadening prejudice of caste and creed in the purifying flame of patriotism. Then and then only will the races of India become an Indian nation. In a public meeting at Patna on Saturday 13th October, 1917, under the auspices of the Patna City Students' Association, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu delivered a lecture on Hindu-Muslim unity. She said:

"It is only because we are ignorant that we are divided and it is the sacred mission of enlightenment to bring not the lesson of quarrel but the lesson of peace."

For the conglomeration and glorification of different religious faiths and practices, Naidu defines religion or religious culture to be an attitude which can open-mindedly absorb as well as respect for all religions. Therefore, she defines religion as 'essentially the love of truth, the love of purity, the service of humanity, the search for wisdom, the great lesson of self-sacrifice, the worship of the same transparent spirit, no matter whether in one language it is called Allah and in another Parameshwar.' (ibid). Naidu's cosmopolitan outlook can cover not only Hindu-Muslim culture but also the others. So she continues- "We are not limiting ourselves to the contributions of the Hindu-Muslim culture alone, but we want the special contributions which the Zoroastrians and Christians and other races scattered over this land can bring us."(ibid).

Naidu's preference for cultural multiplicity can be observed in her letters also. Her *Ode to H.H. the Nizam of Hyderabad* is of interest as an example of courtly poetry in praise of a king or patron of which there is a long tradition not just in English but in Persian and Urdu poetry. Naidu's cultural vision has found expression around the auspicious city of Hyderabad. Her Hyderabad is the icon of India. It is a city frozen in time, a medieval city, exotic and romantic, the very city of her poetic inspiration. It has a static and hierarchical social structure presided over by a humane, paternalistic, benevolent and tolerant prince poet Mir Mahboob Ali Khan (1886-1911), the sixth Nizam of Hyderabad. This city is the symbol of peace, prosperity, cultural amalgamation and religious conglomeration. There is no conflict, either of class or religion, nor any starvation, oppression and suffering. It remains an ideal city of her imaginary republic. It is the incarnation of Yeats' Byzantium. In an extraordinary letter describing the funeral of the prince, Sarojini gives the spontaneous outpouring of devotion and mourning:

"In all history I know of nothing more poignantly lovely than the devotion he aroused and still arouses in the hearts of his people...rich, poor, cultured and ignorant, Hindu, Mohammedan, Parsee, Sikh, Jain, Christian—I wish I could have come to my city of the Arabian Nights in the

lifetime of my own Haroun-al-Rashid! For Hyderabad will never be quite the same again.(Selected Letters 64)

### Conclusion

Sarojini Naidu, the poet, patriot, and the politician was indeed a social force making the harmony and goodwill among the diverse communities. She was a woman of great personal charm, queen of the society, a sweet-tuned and stirring speaker on public platform, of greatness of heart and love for the people irrespective of caste and creed. Arthur Symons truly describes her ‘as the sunflower...opening wider and wider...’ (Introduction: *TGT*). She absorbed light and energy from the cardinal source and scattered those among people and thus bound all in the binding of love and affection. Sarojini Naidu deserves more critical attention; for she wrote as a woman before multiculturalism gained currency as a holistic socio-political movement even in the west. Still she with her prophetic vision could realize the merit of this matter of multiculturalism and brilliantly used it in her works. What she learnt, she learnt from her education, upbringings and inborn talent. Today both the dimension and relevance of multicultural heterogeneity has found greater and more consolidated ground. W.Kymlicka, a liberal multicultural theorist argues that societal cultures ought to be protected because they promote a context of choice for individuals to exercise their freedom. C.Kukathas’ approach to multiculturalism is based on human beings’ most fundamental interest in living according to their conscience and freedom of association. Both the theorists put emphasize on the necessity of the presence of individual liberty. And it is surprising to think that Sarojini Naidu long ago realized it. But it is a matter of regret that this rare talent is still to be fully realized.

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