ABSTRACT

The term 'culture' addresses three salient categories of human activity: the 'personal,' whereby we as individuals think and function as such; the 'collective,' whereby we function in a social context; and the 'expressive,' whereby society expresses itself. Language is the only social institution without which no other social institution can function; it therefore underpins the three pillars upon which culture is built. Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values. Multiple changes that appear in a culture lead to linguistic mutations, creating permanent modifications to the language according to the situation. The English language came to India as a result of the dominance of the British rule over the Indian sub-continent. It gave birth to a new stream of literature in English by Indians which is regarded as Indo Anglian Literature. The language was inherited from the Western world but the expression had hues of Indianness. English language became an instrument to aqueint the world with the Indian culture. The present paper aims to bring forth the art of poetic diction and devices of English language employed by Sarojini Naidu in her poetry to voice the rich and vibrant Indian culture.

KEYWORDS: Indianness, Vernacular Usage, Indian Sensibility, Transcendental Experience

INTRODUCTION

It is a gifted writer, that creates remarkable literature, but, a writer cannot work in a vacuum. He is influenced by the environmental variables and the human constants and strives to bring a balance, between the two, to produce the best work. Indian poets of English have tried to reconcile the two aspects well. They have chosen English language to reflect the Indian thoughts and environment in their works. The English Language and The Indian Spirit: Correspondence Between Kathleen Raine and K. D. Sethna (1986) is a valuable document to the use of English for creative writing by Indian writers. Kathleen Raine, an eminent English poet and a critic, in a letter to K. D. Sethna (poet and critic in Indo-Anglian Literature) wrote:

Have you not in using English exiled your poetic genius from India, to which it must belong, without making it a native of England, for English learned as a foreign language can never nourish the invisible roots of poetry ….I do not believe that we can – or if we could, that we have the right to– write poetry in a language other than our own. (qtd. in Mathur 188)

Kathleen Raine’s apprehension proved to be wrong, as the Indo-Anglian poets have confidently used the language. Many critics see the use of the English language in India as one among many post-colonial mimic activities, resulting from the imposition of the English language as a part of British colonialist intrusion in Indian education, language and literature. In India, some critics see the domination of English language and literature as a form of continuing cultural
imperialism. Others argue that the widespread use, prestige, and expansion of English in India in recent decades have encouraged the literary activities in the realm of Indian Literature in English. Indian writers take liberty to modify the language according to their Indian sensibility. It is apt to quote Kamala Das’s “An Introduction” in which she shows her firmness for using English as her medium of expression. With confidence she asserts that she has full right to express the honest confessions in a language, she feels, is best suited for the expression of her thoughts:

Don’t write in English they said, English is
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Everyone of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortion, its queerness
All mine, mine alone.
It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don’t
You see? It voices my joys, my longings….                     (7-16)

The Indianness in the poems of Indo-Anglian poets is one of the striking features. It is pertinent to quote Rao: “In these poets we see realized in the English language the power of the Indian inheritance, complexity of the Indian experience, and the uniqueness of the Indian voice. We see an Eastern sensibility wholly at home in a Western art” (56). Indian poets thus discovered a sense of exclusive familiarity with the use of English as a language and effectively used it to convey the Indian mind and sensibility.

DISCUSSIONS

Sarojini Naidu was among the pioneer women poets who took the responsibility of delivering the flavour of Indianness to the Western readers. It was upon the advice of Edmond Gosse that she infused the Indian colours into her poetry after which it gained uniqueness and grandeur. Gosse was disappointed to see her early poetry, as they were imitations of English poets and on British objects. He felt that she has been ‘Anglicizing’ her feelings. He advised Sarojini Naidu that from:

…an Indian of extreme sensibility, who has mastered not merely the language but the prosody of the West, what we wished to receive was, not a rechauffe of Anglo-Saxon sentiment in an Anglo-Saxon setting but some revelation of the heart of India. Some sincere penetrating analysis of nature, passion of the principles of antique religion and such mysterious intimations as stirred the sole of the East long before the West had began to dream that it had a sole. (introd. TBT 5)

The advice of Gosse led Naidu to use English language to reflect her Indian sensibility. In her poems one comes across a mingled flavour of refined English poetic tradition and Indian culture. Vernacular usage is a prominent aspect of her poetry. Her famous poem “The Call to Evening Prayer” in The Bird of Time is a marvelous expression in verse that reflects communal harmony and Naidu’s cosmopolitan approach which has been portrayed by vernacular cries like: “Allah ho Akbar! Allah ho Akbar!” in stanza 1 by Muslim devotees and “Ave Maria! Ave Maria!” in stanza 2 by Christian
devotees. Stanza 3 portrays Parsis singing praises of Ahura Mazda. The poem reflects Sarojini Naidu’s sensitivity towards people of all religion. In the last stanza of “The Call to Evening Prayer” she depicted Hindu devotees chanting the mantra of ‘Naray’yan! Naray’yan!’ which displays Naidu’s Hindu sensibility. The stanza conveys the adoration towards Brahma reflecting Hindu philosophy:

Hark to the ageless, divine invocation!
Lift up your hands, O ye children of Brahma,
Lift up your voices in rapt adoration:
Naray’yan! Naray’yan! (TSF 16-20)

Sarojini Naidu was fascinated by the unity of spirit underlying the amazing diversity of Indian life, culture and religion. In “The Call to Evening Prayer”, followers of different faiths are brought together in the bond of love, unity and worship. She visualised India as the divine mother who bestows her blessings on all her children, be they Hindus or Muslims, Parsis, Buddhists or Jains, Sikhs or Christians or of any other creed, in diverse manner, worship her with equal love and devotion. To voice diverse religious implications the relevant chants used by Naidu lend the desired effect.

One of the dominant themes of Sarojini Naidu’s poems is the reflection of spirituality in Indian essence. The spiritual tradition of Hinduism has produced a rich legacy of poets. The Hindu poets had sought to express the sentiments and experiences of their spirituality through poetry. The portrayal of divine love recurs in varied hues in Sarojini Naidu’s poetry. The language is chosen by the poetess to capture Hindu-tradition of love poetry and the Sufi-Muslim tradition. Sarojini Naidu’s lyrics “The Flute Player of Brindaban” and “Songs of Radha, the Milkmaid” depict Hindu tradition of love poetry where the individual soul yearns to unite with the infinite.

Here human love transcends to divine love where the persona is in search of the Infinite. The beloved is the Divine, the Supreme or Krishna, the eternal lover and such lyrics derive their poignancy and appeal from the soul’s hunger for union with the Infinite. “The Flute Player of Brindaban” in The Broken Wing is a beautiful lyric which depicts Naidu’s Hindu sensibility. In a note along with this poem Naidu described Krishna as: “the Divine Flute-player of Brindaban, who plays the tune of the infinite that lures every Hindu heart away from mortal cares and attachments” (TSF 161). The poetess described herself as a devotee in search of the Infinite leaving all the worldly pleasures with an apt simile of “a homeless bird” (TSF 7) and wrote:

Still must I 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. (TSF 7-12)

“Songs of Radha, the Milkmaid” is a poem written in the tradition of Bhakti cult. In “Songs of Radha, the Milkmaid”, Sarojini Naidu resembles Mirabai, the devotee of highest order who had written many prayerful songs (bhajans) in her devotion to Krishna, the divine lover. The poem in the last stanza describes Radha, the devotee, standing in the sanctum with folded hands, seeking shelter and surrendering her soul with a contrite heart: “I carried my gifts to the
Mathura shrine…./ How brightly the torches were glowing…./ I folded my hands at the altars to pray” (TSF 21-23). The word “Mathura” is used with “shrine” depicting a perfect blend of two cultures—Indian and English. Mathura is the place associated with Lord Krishna. In the poem, Naidu depicted Radha, offering her soul as a gift to her divine lover. The devotee is completely lost in devotion and is not concerned about the world around. The devotee gains spiritual awareness of highest order where love as personal desire is transformed to divine love. Radha attains a transcendental experience by identifying herself completely with her divine love. She says: “But my heart was so lost in your worship, Beloved,” (TSF 26). In this poem the chanting of “Govinda! Govinda! / Govinda! Govinda!” at the end of each stanza makes the poem a powerful assertion of faith. Mulk Raj Anand, highly impressed by the poem, observed: “Here the poetry of romanticism, of ornate epithets and delicate similes, has become infused with transcendental experience. Sarojini has transferred love as personal desire into divine love, and given it a sense of eternity, of the Universal” (119).

It was this 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” written by Naidu is a multidimensional poem with interplay of the real, mystical, spiritual and mythical. It expresses a maiden’s fear in a long and lonely way which she has to cover after filling her pitchers from the Jamuna. On a deeper perception, it is a song of the soul craving for union with the divine. The soul is caught in the vicissitudes of this temporal world. On the mythical level, this is the archetypal love-cry of Radha for the eternal flute player Krishna:

O! if the storm breaks, what will betide me?
Safe from the lightning where shall I hide me?
Unless Thou succour my footsteps and guide me,
Ram re Ram! I shall die. (TSF 19-22)

Sarojini Naidu’s Hindu sensibility is well reflected in the poem “Kali the Mother” where she portrayed maidens, brides, mothers, widows, artisans, peasants, victors, scholars, priests, poets and patriots praising and worshiping the mystic mother of Hindu’s, Kali. Naidu mentioned various names by which Kali is known: Uma, Haimavati, Ambika, Parvati, Girija, Shambhavi and Maheshwari. She is symbolic of the consciousness force hidden in everything and active everywhere stands for wisdom and bliss in every Hindu’s heart:

O TERRIBLE and tender and divine!
O mystic mother of all sacrifice,
We deck the somber altars of thy shrine
With sacred basil leaves and Saffron rice;
All gifts of life and death we bring to thee,

_Uma Haimavati !_ (TSF 1-6)

Sarojini Naidu’s poetry on mysticism is not only based on Hindu mythology but also on Islamic belief. In “The Imam Bara” Naidu described 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. In the second stanza of this poem, Naidu striking a note of mysticism and describing the mourners wrote:

Ablaze with the steadfast triumph
Of spirit that never dies.

So may the hope of new ages
Comfort the mystic pain

That cries from the ancient silence

Ali! Hassan! Hussain! (TSF 19-24)

Her lyric “The Prayer of Islam” depicts the mystic experience of the followers of Islam. The poem expresses the ardent desire of the devotees to have communion with the Almighty. The first stanza begins with the adoration of the Almighty by the believers. According to them human weakness are transformed into strength because of their faith: “Thou dost transmute from hour to hour / Our mortal weakness into power, / Our bondage into liberty,” (TSF 13-15). The last stanza of this poem asserts the very essence of their being when they say:

We are the shadows of Thy light,

We are the secrets of Thy might,

The vision of thy primal dream,

Ya Rahman! Ya Rahman! (TSF 17-20)

An impressive aspect of Naidu’s poetry is its conspicuous imagery drawn with utmost refined diction. Imagery offers elegance to poetry. Naidu was a poet of keen sensibility and rich imagination and therefore her poetry is full of delightful imagery which is highly imaginative and suggestive. Bruce King held the opinion that the Indian poets writing in English have, “Indianized their poetry by making it an expression of Indian life as experienced” (128). It stands true for many of Naidu’s poems in which she depicts the Indian life. “In the Bazaars of Hyderabad” is a descriptive lyric in which Sarojini Naidu portrayed the traditional and colourful pageantry of Indian bazaar which is evident even today in India. The vocation of merchants, vendors, goldsmiths, humble fruit-men and flower-girls are described in this poem beautifully who are engaged in their occupation to earn a living. The merchants are selling “Turbans of crimson and silver, / Tunics of purple brocade,” (TSF 3-4). The colours and texture of cloth convey their association with the royal families of India. Naidu further described merchants selling: “Mirror with panels of amber, / Daggers with handles of jade” (TSF 5-6), which once again paints a picture of luxury and chivalry. These lines convey the colour values prominent in the poems of Naidu due to the influence of the Romantics. “Nightfall in the City of Hyderabad” is in the form of couplets and is yet another fine example depicting the splendid scenes of night in the city of Hyderabad. The poem painted the stately magnificence of a flourishing Oriental metropolis and “this riot of colours and ebullience should be considered an Indian contribution to English prosody” (Punekar, Indian Writing 186). She described the Char Minar and the majestic night of Hyderabad thus:

Round the high Char Minar sounds of gay cavalcades

Blend with music of cymbals and serenades.

Over the city bridge Night comes majestical,

Borne like a queen to a sumptuous festival. (TSF 11-14)

Naidu’s Nature poems are adorned with remarkable imagery. Edmund Gosse’s advice to Sarojini Naidu, to forget the Robins and the skylarks of English countryside and to, “Set her poems firmly among the mountains, the gardens, the temples of India, to be a genuine Indian poet of the Deccan not a clever imitator of the English classics” (introd. TBT 5), proved to be a guiding force. Sarojini Naidu accepted his advice and the real poet in her came out in a glorious manner.
and her poetry there after, breathed an Indian air in all its freshness, glory and romanticism, with her themes exclusively Indian. She successfully painted Indian landscape in her nature poems written on different themes. “Summer Wood” is a well written poem by Sarojini Naidu on the theme of love. Human emotions are set at the background of natural world. The images drawn by the poetess paint a tranquil world beneath the Indian boughs of Neem, Tamarind and Molsari. The auditory image of “Koels call” (TSF 5) lends melody to the poem. In the poem the poetess longed to be away from the weary world and be in the tranquility of Nature with her beloved:

Love, come with me where koels call from flowering glade and glen,

Far from the toil and weariness, the praise and prayers of men.

O let us fling all care away, and lie alone and dream

’Neath tangled boughs of tamarind and molsari and neem! (TSF 5-8)

Sarojini Naidu’s poetry is rich in metaphors and similes which are figurative devices of great antiquity. Metaphors and similes are significant figures of speech through which poets express their ideas effectively. Through her imaginative power and refined usage of vocabulary, Naidu has presented some of the finest metaphors and similes. An apt example of Naidu’s fine metaphors is her Nature lyric “Nasturtiums”. In this lyric she compared the beauty of Nasturtium blossoms with the immortal women of Sanskrit legends who possessed radiant virtues. Such a comparison by Naidu reflects that she was deeply rooted to the Indian culture. This poem begins with the admiration of the blossoms in the spring season and transports the reader to India’s legendary past by the description of the virtuous women of Puranic Age. It also reflects her sharp feminine sensibility:

POIGNANT and subtle and bitter perfume

Exquisite, luminous, passionate bloom,

Your leaves interwoven of fragrance and fire

Are Savitri’s sorrow and Sita’s desire,

Draupadi’s longing, Damayanti’s fear,

And sweetest Sankuntala’s magical tears. (TSF 1-6)

In “Summer Woods” the poetess imagined her union with her love. She employed a refined simile to depict love in the archetypal love experience of Radha and Krishna which is embedded deeply in the Indian sensibility:

You and I together, love, in the deep blossoming woods

Engrit with low-voiced silences and gleaming solitudes,

Companions of the lustrous dawn, gay comrades of the night,

Like Krishna and Radha, encompassed with delight. (TSF 13-16)

Naidu’s use of striking similes is one of the unique qualities of her poetry. Her similes succeed in capturing reader’s attention and provide grandeur to her thoughts and expressions. Her similes also bear the stamp of Indianness which lends grace and uniqueness to her poetry.

Symbolism is a powerful way of conveying the inner most thoughts. Poets employ symbolic use of concepts and objects as rhetorical devices, central to the meaning of their works. Sarojini Naidu used symbolism to convey her deepest
thoughts. In some of her poems, what looks like an actual occasion has a symbolic implication. The “Indian Weavers” is rich in symbolic implications and symbolise the three stages of human life – birth, youth and death. Rajyalakshmi remarks: “The Indian weaver’s loom is but the artifice of eternity” (142). The weavers weave cloth for a child in the early hour of the day; during the evening, they weave a bright bridal robe for the young bride where as during the chill of the night they weave the white shroud for the dead. Thus the three hours and the different garments woven by the weavers symbolise different phases one passes through during one’s journey of life in this world. The first stage of man’s life has been suggested in the first stanza where the garment is “Blue as the wing of a halcyon wild” (TSF 3). ‘Blue’ suggests the innocence and freshness, and ‘halcyon’ symbolise the Spirit at the beginning of creation. In the second stanza, the garment is bright like “the plumes of a peacock, purple and green” (TSF 7) and suggests symbolically the gaiety, colour and magnificence of life associated with youth. The weavers are weaving “the marriage-veils of a queen” (TSF 8) symbolizing the joy experienced in youth. The last stanza symbolise death with the help of descriptions like ‘moonlight chill’ in line 9 and the colour white in line 10. Prof. C. D. Narsimahiah highly impressed by the poem comments: “Here in twelve lines, is an elliptical allusive and symbolic representation of life’s journey from birth to death…” (22). The weavers symbolize the Supreme Creator who weaves the yarn of human life in a design which is a combination of happiness and sorrow. Infancy and youth in the first and second stanza represent joy and pleasure where as the ‘old man’s shroud’ in the last stanza represents pain. The transient aspect of human life as expressed in “Indian Weavers” by Sarojini Naidu, having symbolic implications of Hindu trinity representing Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara, is an evidence of her achievement as a remarkable poet.

Sarojini Naidu was sensitive towards Indian folk culture. One of the striking themes of Naidu’s poetry is folk life of India. Her poetry gained vitality and spontaneity through the folk inspiration. Her folk poetry reflected simplicity and contained vocabulary and imagery from everyday scenes and sights which showed her sense of solidarity with folk life as it is lived from day to day. The folk inspiration made her write poetry which beautifully captures celebration of folk life as in “Coromandal Fishers”, “Hymn to Indra”, “Bangel Sellers” etc.

CONCLUSIONS

Sarojini Naidu’s poetry is unique and qualitative. The striking feature of the poems was, the Indianness in them. A. N. Dwivedi rightly remarks, “One of modern India’s illustrious daughters, Sarojini ably served the cause of Indo-Anglian poetry, at the dawn of the twentieth century” (14). Sarojini Naidu was a poet of sharp aesthetic sensibility. She admired beautiful world around her whether it was related to the world of nature or varied colours of Indian cultural heritage. Naidu’s poetic themes were indigenous and capture the spirit of India. There are greater poets than Sarojini Naidu but none more original because she saw things with a fresh approach. She conveyed her private fancies beautifully and lent them universal touch using English language like a perfect artist. M. K. Naik aptly sums up Naidu’s place in the history of Indo-Anglian poetry thus:

Sarojini’s poems are historically significant and intrinsically important... her best poetry is not just a faded echo of the feeble voice of decadent romanticism, but an authentic English lyric utterance exquisitely tuned to the composite Indian ethos, bringing home to the unbiased reader all opulence, pageantry and charm of the traditional Indian life, and the splendors of the Indian scene. (69)

REFERENCES


