



Indian Women's Psyche and Religious Rituals - A Study of Sarojini Naidu's *Suttee* and *Purdah Nashin*

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Abstract

Sarojini Naidu started her writing in the age of twelve. Her first collection of poems, *The Golden Threshold* was published by Arthur Symons. She had prosperous literary life by giving intellectual handling of English. Her *The Golden Threshold* (1905) and *The Bird of Time* (1912) were made her enter into Royal Society of Literature in 1914. Another collected poem is titled as *The Sceptre Flute* (1928), *The Feather of Dawn* (1961), *Feast of Youth*, *The Wizard Mask* and *A Treasury of Poems*. Her English writings with Indian souls were admired by Mahashree Arvind, Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru. Her famous poems which are mostly prescribed for Indian Education are *Palanquin Bearers*, *Indian Weavers*, *Autumn Song*, *Coromandel Fishers*, *An Indian Love Song*, *A Love Song from the North*, *In the Forest*, *Life*, *In the Bazaars of Hyderabad*, *Ecstasy*, *Cradle Song*, *Alabaster*, *Song of A Dream*, and *Past and Future*. This paper ponders over the chosen theme.

Keywords: Indian Women, Psyche, Religion, Ritual, Sarojini Naidu, *Suttee*, *Purdah Nashin*.

Sarojini Naidu's poems are against the imperialists, her love on patriotism, and Indian culture cum religions. All poems of her are having the deep love and divine duty to her nation. Her respects for her mother land has the intensity of love are raising hope towards the future as glorious as the past so that she was honoured as nightingale of India. Her poems are not only portrayed the patriotic love, it shows the Indian life in all its beauty and colour. This feature also manifested love for India. Her poems on the panorama of Indian life have the celebration of various cultures especially Hindu and Muslim life. It shows the womeness in the theme of religious tolerance and she does not fail to show the wide sympathy in her poems. *The Cattle to Evening prayer* has the collective reference for the prayers for the prayers of Hindu, Muslim, Parsi and Christian creeds. There are lot of poems to show the Indian scene combined in the pictures of lives of Hindus and Muslims and their gods and Goddess.

It is easy to list out the poems of Sarojini which show the Muslim life and Islamic culture. The works that contain feministic values are *The Pardah Nashin*, *A Song from Shiraz*, *The Imambura*, *The Prayer of Islam*, *Wandering Beggars*, and *The World Woman*. Dr. Narsigh Srivastara says, "Sarojini Naidu is generally described as a great humanist who expresses in her poetry a genuine reverence for all religious feeling which finds emotional expression mainly in her poems..." (Srivastava 461)

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Sarojini pictures the impact of religious revivalists as well as she does not forget to show the saints like Ramakrishna Paramahansa in the poems based on Hindu rituals. Her poems show the religious themes and its reflections on the common people's life. There are some poems to describe the Hinduism and they follow as *Harvest Hymn*, *Suttee*, *Damayanti to Nala in the Hour of Exile*, *To a Buddha Seated on a lotus*, and so on. The poem *Suttee* reveals the pathetic condition of an Indian widow. This poem is an apt one to show the Indian women's life. The narrator of the poem is a young widow who lost her husband just now. This poem fantastically conveys the selfless and highly devoted love of an Indian woman.

The widow sings a song before offering herself to the fire which was already kept on her husband's body. This type of custom was called as 'sati' which was in the peak at the time of Sarojini Naidu. This poem echoes the life of an Indian widow without the hope of life. The words 'life of my life', and 'death's bitter sword' are portraying that the widow is ready to cut her life with the help of death's bitter sword. She is happy to accept the death. She portrays, "the flesh survive when the soul is gone?" (*Suttee*). By this it is easy to say that she was ready to welcome the death. It shows her love towards her husband. She portrays, her soul (her husband) had died earlier so there is nothing worthy to the flesh (the widow/she) to survive.

The narrator of *Suttee* compares her husband in different terms. She compares her husband as 'lamp', 'tree' and 'life'. The narrator, wife of the death body says that her husband is compared with lamp and the light of her life. Now the light or flame is under the lips of death. The death had blown the flame off so the lamp does not have life no more. Because of this the 'spark' has vanished in the narrator's life so she raises a question to her died husband "Love, must I dwell in the living dark?" (*Suttee*). In the second stanza she compares her husband as 'tree' and is under the 'foot of death' so she claims a question how the blossom (she) can live 'when the tree is dead?' (*Suttee*).

In the third stanza she says, her husband is her life who is in the hands of 'death's bitter sword' and it cuts the both (husband and wife) into 'a broken word'. She portrays that they are rent in twain as one. In the last line she asks the death "shall the flesh survive when the soul is gone?" (*Suttee*). Here she compares herself as flesh and her husband as soul so she is not ready to live without her soul and offers herself to death. This poem is a fine description of the custom 'sati' which is vanished now. This poem shows one of the subalterns in the period of freedom struggle Indian society and how they are ready to accept the subjugation in a pleasant and happiest way.

The concept of the poem is somewhat different from the poem *Purdah Nashin*. *Purdah Nashin (PN)* is another sonnet with three stanzas. This poem deals with the life of a woman behind the veil, 'purdah'. Sarojini says the Muslim ladies are safe in their purdah but at the mean time their feelings are filtered inside the purdah. This poem shows the Indian Muslim ladies' life which is completely dominated by men. In the first stanza Sarojini visualizes the positive aspects of wearing purdah. She says the Muslim ladies feel comfort and easy in purdah. Even though they are in costly dress and costly jewellery which are used

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to decorate themselves and to look beautiful and sensuous they are veiled and waiting for their masters.

It shows the blissful state of Muslim women. This poem has the beautiful description on purdah. It is compared to “Changing fires on sunset seas;” (*Purdhah Nashin*). The veil has beauty in itself and glamour of its own. Through this “Her days are guarded and secure” (*Purdhah Nashin*) and it protects them “From converting sun and wind’s cares”. In purdah the Muslim ladies are as jewels in a ‘turbaned crest’ but they are like secrets hidden in a lovers’ heart. Purdah is default traditional concept of Muslim community. The ladies wear it for various reasons. Simultaneously Sarojini shows the tears of these ladies. She says,

But though on hand unsanctioned dares
Unveil the mysteries of her grace,
Time lifts the curtain unawares,
And sorrow looks into her face, (*Purdhah Nashin*)

Analyzing the two poems *Suttee* and *Purdhah Nashin* of Sarojini Naidu it is easy to view the two religious custom forced on Indian ladies. These two poems show the safety and sorrows of these religious ladies. Sarojini is ready to accept the death of Hindu women after the death of their husband. For that she gives well defined description. Here she is not ready to accept Ram Mohan Roy’s abolishing ‘sati’. She encourages this death because she is not ready to see the miserable lives of these ladies after their husbands’ death.

On the other hand she is not ready to accept the veil which covers the Muslim ladies fully. It may be beautiful and safe but Sarojini feels it as a symbol of subaltern. Their well dressed and jewellery wearing beauty are hidden in purdah and it is to unveil before their masters. It is an act of slavery because they are unable to show their feelings openly as Hindu women do.

On comparing these two poems, both poems are sonnets. The poem *Suttee* has first person narration; an Indian, Hindu widow who is ready to face her death happily after her husband’s death. In the next poem *Purdhah Nashin*, the poet narrates the Muslim women’s hidden sufferings. It shows the feelings of these ladies are hidden and they are unable to reveal their feelings openly. These two poems *Suttee* and *Purdhah Nashin* are the expressions of Indian women Physic.

In the first poem *Suttee* the lady is ready to keep a full stop for future lifelong sufferings but in the poem *Purdhah Nashin* the lady is accepting the purdah even though their sorrows and tears are veiled behind it. Sarojini shows the two big customs which rule two gigantic religious societies of India as well as the world in her own perspective.

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