

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity: Women's Voice, Identity, and Empowerment in the Poetry of Sarojini Naidu

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Abstract

This paper looks at Sarojini Naidu's poetry. It reflects her ability to harmonise ancient Indian customs and beliefs with contemporary thought. It is about the lives of women during the colonial era in India. Four poems are studied here: "The Pardah Nashin," "The Indian Gipsy," "The Song of Princess Zeb-un-Nissa in Praise of Her Own Beauty," and "The Gift of India." These poems are read in the context of purdah, arranged marriage and the nationalistic transition. Naidu doesn't attempt to balance tradition and change. She maintains suspense and tension. Each poem takes a different place on the line between confinement and self-assertion. "The Pardah Nashin" portrays tradition as both beautiful and burdensome. It concludes in a tranquil sadness. In "The Song of Princess Zeb-un-Nissa," a historical woman can sing about her beauty without any embarrassment. "The Indian Gipsy" portrays a woman who is unconfined by domestic circumstances. "The Gift of India" transforms a mother's personal anguish into a public appeal in the First World War. The paper uses postcolonial and feminist ideas, including Partha Chatterjee's thoughts on nationalism and Gayatri Spivak's views on silenced women. It takes Naidu's female speakers to the limit and beyond their time. Naidu's true brilliance is in her incomplete voice for her women. They are partial and difficult to identify. It is still a loss that it carries. But this voice serves as a basis for later Indian women writers in English.

Keywords: Sarojini Naidu, tradition and modernity, women's voice, identity, empowerment, colonial India

Introduction: Sarojini Naidu, Colonial India, and the Question of Womanhood

Sarojini Naidu was a poet who later became a politician. In 1905, she was 26 and published her first collection, *The Golden Threshold*. Within 12 years, two more were

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published: *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing* (1917). She first came to readers' attention in London, not as a Congress leader, but as a lyrical voice. Later, Mahatma Gandhi gave her the title of "Bharat Kokila", the "Nightingale of India", a nickname that stuck to her as a songbird, and she became one, before she was a strategist (Corazza 66). However, the two professions never became completely distinct. In her political speech, Naidu was endowed with a poetic sensibility and a nationalistic feeling in her poetry. Edward Marx situates this double career within a larger pattern. He suggests that Naidu's initial poetic image was an image of the ground upon which her later nationalist authority would rest (Marx 45). Her works are now read as a single entity: a "cosmopolitan nationalist" who constructed an image of India for Indian and British readers using the lyric mode (Reddy 571).

Naidu wrote in a time of rapid change. The British colonists had introduced new laws, new schools and new civic terminology into Indian life. Child marriage, sati, and the prohibition on widow remarriage were among the issues that were opposed by the reform movements. Meanwhile, traditional norms continued to prevail in the home. This practice of women's modesty, the code of rules regarding it, and the practice of arranged marriage prevailed in most households, including the elite ones (Mudiganti). As Partha Chatterjee has argued, Indian nationalism accomplished this contradiction by dividing social life into two domains. The "outer" sphere of politics and economics could take up the Western method without reproach. The "inner" domain of home and spirit had to stay pure, and women were assigned to guard it (Chatterjee 237-38). The divide was crossed by Naidu's life as well. Her father believed in girls' education, and she herself had married outside her caste. Her poetry, however, keeps coming back to veiled, secluded, ornamented women, who are precisely the "inner" that Chatterjee talks about.

This is where Naidu's position in Indian English poetry lies. She was one of the first Indian women internationally to become widely acclaimed for original English verse. Her English patrons, Arthur Symonds and Edmund Gosse, encouraged her to drop the Western subjects and produce "some revelation of the heart of India" (qtd. in Corazza 60). She did as she was told, and her poems were filled with saris, bangles, temples and veiled women. What this cost her is still a subject of debate by critics. Others have interpreted her sensual visual language as a collusion with an Orientalist market that craved an exotic feminine East (Reddy 573). Others read the same imagery as a strategic disguise, a way of smuggling political feeling past a colonial audience that expected only decoration (Corazza 63).

In this paper, four poems are studied in the context of that disagreement: "The Pardah Nashin," "The Indian Gipsy," "The Song of Princess Zeb-un-Nissa in Praise of Her Own Beauty", and "The Gift of India." In concert, they journey from the private within the veiled woman to the public voice of the mourning people of the nation. The central research problem is this: How does Naidu's poetry negotiate between the custom inherited and the emerging modern selfhood, and what is gained (or lost) by having the figure of "woman" negotiate this? This is an important question because Naidu is one of the pioneers of a long line of Indian women writers in English. It is evident from her close reading that this tradition was handed down to her and that later writers had to develop it for themselves.

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity in Sarojini Naidu's Poetry

The terms "tradition" and "modernity" were not a neutral pair in colonial India. Normally, tradition was interpreted to mean Hindu or Muslim tradition, the joint-family system and inherited tradition. Modernity is typically equated with English education, print culture and the language of individual rights. The two could never be completely divorced from each other. Old practices were justified by modern arguments, and orthodox voices, drawing on old texts, opposed new laws (Mudiganti). This blend envelops Naidu's poetry. She wrote in contemporary and colonial language, but she coloured it with pre-modern imagery: veils, palanquins, zenanas, and Persian queens. It is not a contradiction that Meena Alexander has termed Naidu's working method of ornamentation and political sentiment (Alexander 68).

This mixture is best illustrated in "The Pardah Nashin". The poem begins luxuriously with, "Her life is a revolving dream / Of languid and sequestered ease" (Naidu 53). A woman covered by a veil, the pardah-nashin, is dressed like a treasure. Her dress is 'like morning mist Shot opal, gold and amethyst' (Naidu 53). Naidu might have ended there, providing a pretty face for a reader yearning for the exotic. Rather, the final stanza reflects. Eventually, the curtain that is Time "lifts unawares" and "Sorrow looks into her face" (Naidu 53). As opposed to a picture, the poem ends on a question: "Who shall prevent the subtle years, / Or shield a woman's eyes from tears?" (Naidu 53). Tradition promises protection. The poem doubtfully questions that promise.

Critics have noted such duplicity as a signature style of Naidu's approach. In the eyes of Chiara Corazza, the Pardah Nashin is a poem that, on the surface, celebrates purdah but reveals its emptiness. The abundant imagery is not an endorsement. It's more akin to bait, which is the way to lure a colonial audience into a familiar setting before the grieving of that setting. Anna Snaith makes a related point about Naidu's poems on secluded women in general. Snaith admits, "while these poems are certainly not radically feminist, they recognise the voice and motivation of women" (qtd. in Corazza 65). It's a modern gesture within a traditional frame, that is, the recognition, although partial.

"The Song of Princess Zeb-un-Nissa in Praise of Her Own Beauty" further complicates the picture. The poem is based on a historical Mughal princess, and adopts her voice, which is pure self-praise: "When from my cheek I lift my veil / The roses turn with envy pale" (Naidu 38). Zeb-un-Nissa speaks openly of her own beauty; the nightingales "awake and strain / Their souls into a quivering song" only for her. (Naidu 38) As a woman waits behind a curtain for rescue, she does not use this language. It is a more open form of self-expression; it is a modern English lyric, drawn from a Persian courtly tradition. But Naidu's negotiation is not about tradition or modernity. It is both open at once, and provides the place for her images to be supplied by her inheritance, and the place where her images are questioned or claimed by a modern lyric "I".

Women's Voice and the Expression of Female Subjectivity

Female subjectivity was rare in colonial Indian writing in English. Women were frequently described as dutiful wives, widows, or decorative brides. They did not speak in their own voice; instead, their desires were not stated directly. It helps to remember the famous warning of Gayatri Spivak about the colonised woman's speech as well as the subaltern woman's speech: "In the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female, is even more deeply in shadow"

(Spivak 271). But there are moments in Naidu's poetry when the shadow is interrupted, though at times rather awkwardly and with persistence. The four poems reviewed have brought to life a woman who is normally silent in most colonial literature.

"The Song of Princess Zeb-un-Nissa" is the most daring. This poem is a dramatic monologue, and the speaker is praising herself in an uncensored manner: "When I lift my veil from my cheek, / The roses turn with envy pale" (Naidu 38). She accuses hyacinths of complaining and languishing in a sweet distress at the loosening of a single lock of her hair (Naidu 38). It is not modest. It's self-assured and assertive with a sense of triumph. Naidu's historical princess has a voice of her own, and it's one that's built around desire for her own image, which is seldom afforded to women in the poetry of this time. Shahla Anand has claimed that Naidu's rhetorical poems create a progression from decorative restraint to direct address, which is clearly evident in the shift from the silence of the *pardah-nashin* to the princess's self-praise (Anand 27).

In *The Indian Gipsy*, the subjectivity is developed in a different way, not with vanity, but with freedom. The gipsy woman wears "tattered robes" that "hoard a glittering trace / Of bygone colours" (Naidu 50). She is likened to a falcon and a tiger: "Tameless, with the bold falcon's agile grace, / And the lithe tiger's sinuous majesty" (Naidu 50). Naidu sets this woman outside of the typical colonial Indian woman's domestic economy. She is rather part of "Time's forgotten source," which elevates her literary profile above the normal rank of society (Naidu 50). Her subjectivity is not what she says about herself, but rather what she is not bound to.

The *Pardah Nashin* is based on silence and its disruption. For two stanzas, the veiled woman is completely silent, described only from the outside, as ornament and possession. This interior life is only glimpsed in the final stanza, and as grief: "Time lifts the curtain unawares, / And Sorrow looks into her face" (Naidu 53). This subjectivity is not the one that is selected. It opens itself to time, despite the system meant to make it more secure. It opens itself up to time despite the system that is supposed to make it more secure. Together, these three poems evoke a range of female interiority. One woman believes she is beautiful and asserts it. One walks without the restraint of family. One is denied a voice till sorrow makes one gap. Naidu provides neither a single model of the modern female subject nor a variety of positions along a single unfinished line.

Reconstructing Women's Identity: Gender, Culture, and Social Expectations

For the women in Naidu's poems, identity is seldom self-created. It is determined by marriage, class, religion, and household role. Naidu's poems carefully document this assignment, while, at the same time, attempting to find space within it. "The *Pardah Nashin*" comes to the point most directly. The veil enveloping the woman is her identity. She is defined by her "girdles and her fillets," her "raiment," her hidden "carven lattices" (Naidu 53). She is compared to "jewels in a turbaned crest" and "secrets in a lover's breast" (Naidu 53), and she becomes a precious, passive object, owned by someone else. In the first two stanzas, there is no hint of her name, her wish, or her plan.

Indeed, Naidu's political history demonstrates that she was aware of the costs of this system. Chiara Corazza notes that Naidu campaigned publicly against *purdah* even while her poetry lingered over its beauty, a tension Corazza calls one of the "inner tensions and conflicts" running through Naidu's whole body of work (67). The poem doesn't solve this conflict. It carries it on, and it is not eroded by ornament or by

anguish. The ideology of this seclusion is described as plainly as by historians of the same time period. Antoinette Burton describes the domestic world in which the isolated house lives as the “prison-house of domesticity”, and the lattices of the pardah-nashin are as much a fit as anything that could be fitted onto a Victorian parlour (Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive* 16). Swapna Banerjee adds to the complexities of the situation. She claims that domesticity has evolved into a “new cultural logic” in the colonial era, which, unevenly and insufficiently, provides women new forms of agency, within the same constrained space (Banerjee). Naidu’s poem simultaneously opens up two different readings: the prison as a place of confinement, and confinement as a site for the construction of identity, always limited.

The Indian Gipsy builds identity on a different axis, that of caste and settlement, as opposed to the domestic role. The gipsy is “daughter of a wandering race” (Naidu 50), that is, without a permanent home. She is not part of the identities established for elite Indian women during this time. The gipsy escapes is precisely what Naidu’s nationalist generation of reformers hoped for: “Indian womanhood as bound to the private realm”, made public space available to women only after nationality had established feminine virtue as a guard to the inner life of the nation” (Tusan 625). In contrast to human time, Naidu refers to other, non-human times that are deep: “She’s twin-born with primal mysteries, / And drinks of life at Time’s forgotten source” (Naidu 50). This act transcends the normal social classification of the gipsy. It is a romantic gesture, it is a risky gesture; it can be used to transform a real marginalised community into a decorative myth (Reddy 573). Nevertheless, in the strict context of the poem, the gipsy, as a woman, is the only one of these individuals who is not married, under purdah, or, in Tusan’s sense of the word, “private.”

“The Song of Princess Zeb-un-Nissa” constructs identity through personal achievement within courtly/aristocratic culture. Selfhood is grounded in her own beauty and in the impact it has on the natural world around her; nightingales and roses respond to her (Naidu 38). The poem still makes her currency “feminine”, but it is her choice how she presents her currency and how it is discussed. She is not an embodiment or a collective symbol of “The Indian woman.” She is a named, historical and singular person. In each of the three poems, there is a continual interaction between individual and collective cultural identity. The pardah-nashin is not able to get away from the institution of purdah. The gipsy is characterised by an entire wandering group. Even with the title of “Zeb-un-Nissa,” she appropriates her power from a particular Persian-Mughal court tradition, not from the void. The identities of Naidu’s women are not constructed from a blank page but are rather negotiated within inherited categories.

From Voice to Empowerment: Resistance, Freedom, and Female Self-Assertion

In Naidu’s poetry, the voice does not necessarily generate empowerment. Several of her women don’t get any change in circumstances because they speak, or feel they speak, without doing anything. “The Gift of India” is not like that. It takes a woman’s voice beyond the confines of the private, ornamental realm of purdah. It moves into the public sphere of national address, and by extension, an authority the previous poems only hint at. During his more public career, Naidu assumed this rhetorical authority of speaking on behalf of Indian womanhood onto foreign soil, as Arora argues, “taking to an international audience the assumed authority to speak on behalf of Indian womanhood” (Arora 88).

The poem is a personification of India as a mother speaking to an unnamed “you”, representing the British Empire and the world. In her opening question, she directly challenges: “Is there aught you need that my hands withhold, / rich gifts of raiment or grain or gold?” (Naidu 146). She has already sacrificed all that is material. Now she has bequeathed to her sons: “yielded the sons of my stricken womb / To the drum-beats of duty, the sabers of doom” (Naidu 146). The poem was written in August 1915, at the time of the First World War, when hundreds of thousands of Indian soldiers were serving and dying for the British war effort. The mother-nation collects her sons’ scattered graves, “gathered like pearls” by “the Persian waves” and “strewn like blossoms” on “the blood-brown meadows of Flanders and France” (Naidu 146). Grief here is public grief. It is directed externally towards an empire that has yet to express gratitude.

The last octave makes the grievance a demand. Mother India believes that “when peace comes, the world must offer memorial thanks / To the comrades who fought” and “honour the deeds of the deathless ones” (Naidu 147). It is not a plea, but an imperative: “Remember the blood of my martyred sons!” (Naidu 147). This is a different register than “The Pardah Nashin”, which is the register of sorrow that comes upon you; it is not one that you call out yourself. In “The Gift of India”, the female voice calls for acknowledgement. It will not be erased directly.

The poem’s power lies in its reliance on a familiar nationalist narrative, presenting the nation as a suffering, sacrificing mother. This was the power of this figure, as Indian nationalism of this period regularly invoked the nation as a mother whose honour must be protected and who must be sacrificed for the reverence of her people (Chatterjee 243-45). His essay, which traces this to the “structural bargain,” argues that the question of women’s status does not have to be resolved first, given the impossibility of thoroughgoing liberal reform under colonial conditions (Chatterjee, qtd. in Tusan 625). In subsequent, highly cited work on gendered nationalism, Cynthia Enloe notes that nationalism “has typically sprung up from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation, and masculinised hope” and that while the men carried the nation’s memory, the mother-figures carried out the nation’s emotion. (Enloe) It would seem Naidu’s poem works in this mould, and is conservative for that reason, because some readers do not see it as giving women an actual political voice, but just as a woman suffering as a symbol of them. The poem does something; however, the notion of the mother-nation doesn’t strictly demand: it insists that the right to remember is not a courtesy, but a duty, in the voice of a woman speaking for herself and for the dead, not a woman spoken for. “The Gift of India” is the extreme point of movement in this study: from the private sphere to the public sphere, and Naidu’s empowerment in each of these poems has come with limitations, hardships and loss.

Conclusion: Reimagining Womanhood between Tradition and Modernity

The purpose of this paper was to explore the relationship between the inherited custom and the emerging modern selfhood in four poems by Sarojini Naidu. There was no single answer, and that is the finding. Naidu doesn’t resolve the conflict between tradition and modernity. She keeps it open, allowing each woman in these poems to be at a different point along that fringing line.

The pardah-nashin is silent till she is filled with grief, and that grief comes on its own. The princess Zeb-un-Nissa speaks of herself in terms of her own beauty in a medium of a courtly idiom that she inherited. The Indian gipsy is neither inside nor outside the domestic sphere, although her freedom is cloaked in myth rather than in reality. In the final poem studied in this series (Mother India), the private grief is transformed into a public call to action; Mother India speaks with authority that the earlier women held.

The same trend is evident in Naidu's life. She protested against the purdah in the public sphere and brought purdah imagery back into poetry (Corazza 66-67). It's not a habit that's separate from the four poems. Early forms of it! It is not an entire freedom that they give to women, rather a partial freedom, a princess's vanity, a gipsy's wildness, a veiled woman's belated grief, a mother's public claim. Each is limited. Each was significant because English poetry by Indian women had rarely even allowed this kind of interiority before Naidu.

Her real achievements in feminist and Indian English writing are in that careful, unfinished opening, not in any one of the triumphant statements on women's rights. She continues to have the same question today. The question of how to gain modern selfhood without losing cultural belonging remains a concern for women in South Asia. Naidu didn't provide a conclusive response. Instead, she left behind a set of voices, trapped between the veil and the platform and reading her means not only recognising what she couldn't resolve, but also recognising what she cleared the way for the writers who followed.

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