

Sarojini Naidu:
“*Romanticism and Resistance*”

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I

WHAT FOLLOWS IS A brief inquiry into the complex feminism of a woman who lived at the interface of two cultures, that of the Hyderabad she was born into and the colonial culture of British India. She passed through the diction and manners of the latter into a poetry and politics forged, at least in her later years, within the very tumult of Nationalist politics. Yet there are questions to be asked of her life and letters. There seems to be a radical cleft between the intense if imprisoning passions of her poetry and the political life she espoused. Did the female self she discovered in political action successfully subvert the passive if anguished images she picked up from turn-of-the-century English poetry? Or is there a dichotomy between poet and politician scarcely to be explained, pointing towards complicated, covert procedures of creativity? Further, how did the English language, which she was greatly dependent on, work for her, first colonizing and then releasing her into the ferment of India?

II

Her first meeting with Gandhi helped to set the tone of her political life. It's London 1914. Gandhi is there after South Africa, after the success of his *satyagraha* protest against the British imposition of taxes on Indians, and against the law that all Indians should be fingerprinted and forced to carry passes. Naidu calls on him. She climbs the stairs and comes on an open door

... framing a living picture of a little man with a shaven head, seated on the floor on a black prison blanket and eating a messy

meal of squashed tomatoes and olive oil out of a wooden prison bowl. Around him were ranged some battered tins of parched ground nuts and tasteless biscuits of dried plantain. I burst in instinctively into happy laughter . . .

Gandhi invites her to share his meal, remarking, " 'Ah, you must be Mrs. Naidu! Who else dare be so irreverent?' " " 'An abominable mess,' " she replies, " 'no thanks!' " Looking back Sarojini Naidu comments: "In this way and at that instant commenced our friendship . . . which never wavered for a single hour . . ." ¹

The vivid adherence to detail and the refusal to romanticize, both disclosed in this small encounter, were to characterize Naidu's political career. In 1930, five years after she was elected President of the Indian National Congress, she was powerfully involved in Gandhi's Salt March. At the crack of dawn on 6 April 1930, Gandhi and his company went down to the sea to bathe; he then gathered up in his palm a few grains of the salt that had dried on the beach. In symbolic defiance of the British salt law, which held a monopoly on the production of salt, thousands followed after Gandhi. Countless women participated, bearing earthen ware and metal pots in which they carried away salt water. The salt, once dried, was auctioned off quite publicly, nature itself harnessed in the struggle for national freedom. On 5 May Gandhi was arrested and the leadership of the non-violent movement fell to Sarojini Naidu. With 25,000 volunteers she approached Darshana determined to enter the salt works there as Gandhi had planned. It was hot and dry, and the volunteers suffered from terrible thirst. The police were ranged to meet them and beat them violently, often over the head. Naidu never flinched. She addressed the volunteers, prayed with them, and at times, to keep her strength going, sat in a small deckchair writing or spinning *khadi*.² As the Gandhian volunteers who courted arrest fell to the police blows, Naidu sat calm, keeping watch. By mid-month she herself was arrested and carted off to jail.

She suffered frequent imprisonment, the most lengthy and painful in 1942 after the Quit India Resolution when she, together with Gandhi and his wife Kasturba, was incarcerated in

the Aga Khan palace. Sickness and inaction haunted them all. In February of the following year, while still imprisoned, Gandhi started a fast unto death. It was a tragic blow when Kasturba, who had been suffering from a slow, prolonged fever, died; after her death Gandhi was released. Naidu herself, the victim of malarial fever, was set free on 21 March 1943, aged 64.

III

Despite her great political prominence, Sarojini Naidu first entered the public realm as a poet, and was celebrated as such. She espoused a mellifluous if dated English diction: her images of private, pained women suffering emotional deprivation, even psychic imprisonment, stand as a direct foil to the public life she so fearlessly took to. In the cause of National freedom, she travelled countless miles, often in hardship, courting arrest, campaigning in her strong orator's voice all over India from as early as 1903. Was she indeed able to cauterize her private pain through her poems and then move outwards into the public sphere? Or did the poems with their sometimes cloying diction, their female figures trapped in an unredeemed sexuality, force her to leave them behind, the writer herself consumed more and more by the political struggle so that by 1917 she effectively stopped writing?

Naidu inherited something of the complex linguistic situation of India. Born in 1879 of Bengali parents in the city of Hyderabad, she spoke not Bengali but Urdu, the Islamic language of culture in Hyderabad. Living at the edge of Bengali and espousing Urdu, Naidu added to these English, the language of colonization. She used English both in her poetry and in her powerful orations.

Her first book of poetry, *The Golden Threshold*, was published in London in 1905. Its frontispiece was a pen and ink drawing by J. B. Yeats: "June 1896" appears under the clearly legible signature. Her image is instructive. The face of the young woman, her posture upright though not stiff, is grave, composed. Her eyes are dark, etched firmly under the straight brows. Her hair is tied back. The hands clasped above her chest form a graceful line to the chin. The shoulders are erect. It is clear from this line drawing that both the gravity and the innocence of this ado-

lescent were visible. Sarojini was only fifteen when she was sent off to England on a scholarship from the Nizam of Hyderabad. She had indiscreetly fallen in love with a Dr. Naidu, far older than she and of the wrong caste; she had to be got out of the country. The portrait was made at the end of her sojourn abroad.

The Golden Threshold was published with an introduction by Arthur Symons, an established man of letters by the time the volume appeared. He tells us that the volume is being published at his "persuasion."³ His English turn-of-the-century awe at the "mystic" Orient and decadent concern with the exotic in this young woman emerge in his lengthy description of her eyes, which he says concentrate all her beauty, and in his glowing descriptions of her "clinging dresses of Eastern silk" and her "long black hair" (p. 16).

Interwoven with Symons's praise for the "agony of sensation" (p. 17) in this young woman are extracts from her letters from Hyderabad, in which she reveals just how she came to use the English language with all the fluency, even euphony, that Symons and others so admired. Sarojini tells of how she was "stubborn and refused to speak" English. Her father, a famous chemist whose obsession was alchemy, locked up his daughter alone in a room for a whole day. She was a child of nine, and the letter written years later conveys the shock of this first punishment: "I came out of it a full-blown linguist. I have never spoken any other language to him or to my mother who always speaks to me in Hindustani" (p. 11).

It would seem crucial that the young girl acquired the language of colonization, English, via the closed room, forerunner of the prisons she was forced to inhabit as an activist in the National movement. Nor was it merely an accident that she chose to speak English to both parents, mother and father severed from her through that deliberate choice of the language of both punishment and accomplishment.

Indeed, Naidu's early poetry (and all her poetry was composed in English) establishes a theme never overcome in her career as a writer. The work is haunted by a voice telling of other female selves, resonances of subjectivity, that endure mutilation and are imprisoned psychically. The search for "the blind ultimate silence

of the dead” that overtakes the speaker on the way to Golconda finds its emotive counterpart in the lives of the women in a poem like “Pardah Nashin”: their days behind the veil are described as “a revolving dream / Of languid and sequestered ease. . . .” Their clothing, idealized and unreal, caught within the walls of a segregated dwelling, becomes “morning mist / Shot opal, gold and amethyst.”⁴ The stasis Naidu evokes is not so far from that of a Dowson or Symons enthralled by the deathly passivity in which a woman must be fixed. In his poem “Morbidezza,” for instance, Symons in full flourish as a decadent celebrates a “White girl,” her “flesh as lilies” now “Grown, ’neath a frozen moon. . . .” In “Maquillage” he describes in detail the artifice of a woman, her “rouge on fragile cheeks, / Pearl-powder, and about the eyes / The dark and lustrous Eastern dyes.”⁵ Both poems appeared in *Silhouettes*, a volume whose second edition appeared in 1896, when Sarojini was still in England. The young Sarojini learnt her lesson all too well, embracing for herself the world-weary sensations, the stasis, the unmistakable agony of women who have nowhere to go. The irony is that she should learn from Symons or Dowson, carrying their diction back to India, using in her poetry images of exhausted women, hermetically sealed, a double colonization that the interchange of cultures drew her to.

In “Suttee,” Naidu goes a step further. The voice is that of a woman mourning the death of her beloved husband: he was the “lamp of my life”; without him she is condemned to live in the dark. He was the “Tree of my life,” now crushed by death’s cruel foot. How should she, a mere blossom, survive without trunk, root, or stalk? In the culminating stanza, the mellifluous language highlighting the terrible self-destruction the woman is ready to embrace, the voice asks:

Life of my life, Death’s bitter sword
 Hath rent us like a broken word,
 Rent us in twain who are but one . . .
 Shall the flesh survive when the soul is gone? (*Poems*, p. 18)

Self and other are united as substance and sense in a word that is now “broken.” The language of dualism rises up to buttress the division of gender, the woman likened in this trope, not unfamiliar to readers of Romantic poetry, to the flesh in all its weakness,

and the man linked to the powerful soul, the immortal spirit. The question is merely rhetorical; there is no question of the woman's survival without her beloved husband. Lacking the soul, the flesh is dross, fit merely to be consigned to the fire. From stasis and the enclosure of a woman's life we move to the immolation of the female body once it has been cleft from its male counterpart. Romanticism imposed by colonial British education allies Naidu's "Pardah Nashin" and "Suttee" with Wordsworth's *Ruined Cottage*, where Margaret, abandoned by Robert, can only wait within the decay of domestic walls or roam abroad in madness, and with Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott*.

IV

When *The Golden Threshold* appeared in 1905, Naidu was a young woman of twenty-six, married, with four young children. But far from being content to remain within the walls of the home she shared with her husband, she moved outwards, into the political realm. It was as if the immobilization portrayed in her female images cauterized her own pain, permitting her self an entry into the public realm. In December 1904 at the eighteenth session of the Indian National Congress — a large portion of which was devoted to issues of women's rights like education, purdah, child marriage, and polygamy — Naidu met some of the great reformers of her day, including the powerful Ramabai Ranade, who presided over the women's sessions. For her part, Naidu recited the patriotic "Ode to India," which was much appreciated at this first public reading.⁶ At the centre of the poem lies the image of India as a "slumbering Mother" who must be awoken by the daughter's cry. If in "Suttee" the bond to the male lover (husband) renders the woman helpless, here the longing to awaken the mother quickens a desire for empowerment, political myth intersecting with subjective need. The ancient Indian earth is still able to "Beget new glories." The idealization of the past is drawn into the voice in the quest for a future, equally idealized:

Mother, O Mother, wherefore doest thou sleep?
Arise and answer for thy children's sake!

...

Waken O slumbering Mother and be crowned,
Who once wert empress of the sovereign past. (*Poems*, p. 58)

It is as if the daughter imprisoned by passion is striking free of her own bondage in the act of awakening the mother.

Indeed, the image of India as mother struck a deep vein in the culture. *Punya bhumi* (blessed earth) and *bharat mata* (mother India) were linked together for both poet and audience. The mother was sacred, potent, terrible to her foes when awoken. In a later poem, Naidu celebrates "Kali the mother," the fierce, passionate goddess of both life and destruction: "O terrible and tender and divine! / O mystic mother of all sacrifice" opens the poem, which ends with an invocation: "*Kali! Maheshwari!*" Mindful of her foreign readers, Naidu has added a note: "These are some of the many names of the Eternal Mother of Hindu Worship" (*Poems*, pp. 177-79).

India's association with British colonialism provides a telling twist to the pervasive femaleness of the Indian earth. Citations from Keshub Chunder Sen, one of the great figures of the Bengal Renaissance, reveal how the trope acquires symbolic power for anti-colonial activity. Sen, who had visited England in 1870, was immensely taken with English culture and longed to unite Britain and India, Christianity and Hinduism. In his extended figure India becomes the bride and England the groom:

Let India, beloved India be dressed in all her jewellery —
those sparkling orient gems for which this land is so famous. . . .
The bridegroom is coming. . . . Let India be ready in due season.⁷

But by 1883 the image turns; in Sen's "Asia's Message to Europe," the mother country is a woman raped, a prisoner of England, violated, bleeding. The artifice of diction opens up the pain of an earth violated:

Behold the sweet angel of the East into whose beauty the very
colours of heaven seem to have been woven — the fair East . . .
lies prostrate, a bleeding prisoner . . . The rivers that run eastward
and the rivers that run westward are crimson with Asiatic gore . . .
(Iyengar, pp. 44-45)

If Keshub Chunder Sen's tragic realization provides a momentary insight into the symbolic femaleness of India, Naidu carried

that symbolism into her growing sense of feminist commitment. By 1906, when she spoke to the Indian Social Conference in Calcutta, there is a causal connection between the deprivation of civil rights that Indian women suffer and the success of the British colonizers. Her language is fierce and direct. Whereas in "Suttee" the man had been invoked as the woman's soul, here the woman is given full autonomy, a "human soul" and with it the inalienable birthright of "liberty and life." Now the liberation of India is held to be inseparable from the liberation of its women. The soul, when evoked, is firmly placed in female flesh, and linked to the radical powers of maternity:

Does one man dare to deprive another of his birthright to 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 dared in the case of Indian women. That is why you men of India are today what you are: because your fathers in depriving your mothers of that immemorial birthright have robbed you, their sons, of your just inheritance. Therefore I charge you, restore to your women their ancient rights . . .⁸

As in "Ode to India," the idealized Vedic past stands as a golden age. Naidu was famed as an orator throughout India and in many of her speeches the deprivation suffered by the women around her, and by her own self in its most private portions, comes to figure as the ground of change. Restoration of women's rights becomes a necessary condition for National freedom.

Often in the poems, however, a woman's pain is conveyed as a portion of things as they are, without reference to possible change; the telling seems to suffice. In "Nasturtiums" for instance, the speaker evokes both the bitter fragrance of the bloom and the sensations elicited by the sight of the petals, then moves on to a recitation of the names of women from Hindu mythology. Each of the women, Savitri or Sita, Draupadi, Damayanti or Shakuntala, has suffered pain or betrayal at the hands of a man. The poet's footnote points them out as "immortal women of Sanskrit legend and song"; their grief and virtue still "inspire" the lives of Indian women (*Poems*, p. 95). The tale of Sita in particular haunted Naidu, especially the portion of her life set forth in the

disputed Uttar Rama Kanda of the *Ramayana*. There King Rama, still dubious about her virtue after the years of exile he has forced upon her, requires Sita to undergo a test by fire. Sita, white haired now and the mother of grown twins, their faces the spitting image of Rama's own, utterly blameless still, is humiliated. She cries out to the mother earth and earth, quite literally her mother, splits open to save her. Sita is swallowed back into the earth from which she had emerged (King Janaka, her 'father,' discovered her while a field was being ploughed). Naidu puts this myth, with its ontological base in the maternity of the earth, to startling political use. In her activities with Gandhi and C. F. Andrews to prevent the abuse of indentured women labourers who were taken from India to South Africa and Fiji, Naidu makes covert use of the fate of Sita. The godly figure of Rama, in his role as cruel husband, is elided and the British rulers take his place: "I . . . raise my voice" cries Naidu in a speech of 1917, "not for the men, but for women, for those women whose proudest memory it is that Sita would not stand the challenge to her honour but called upon the mother earth to avenge her and the earth opened up to avenge her" (*Speeches*, p. 92).

V

1917 saw the publication of Naidu's last volume of poetry, *The Broken Wing*. She was 38. After it, though she might have scribbled a few lines from time to time, she never seriously wrote poetry. Her life was consumed by the rigours of public campaigning, her years punctuated by imprisonment. Politically, she was known throughout India. This last volume culminates in a long poem called *The Temple*, a poem of undeniable eroticism that the epigram from Tagore ("My passion shall burn as the flame of Salvation") cannot quite mask. One gathers that the poem caused quite a stir when the volume first appeared. There were rumours of illicit love or a sexual passion the poet could not wholly fulfil in her life. The poem itself is divided into three main sections, each in turn broken up into short poems, three or four stanzas in length. The tight stanzaic form Naidu chooses is heightened in formality by the use of a title for each short poem, "The offering," "The feast," and so forth. In each case the

symbolism is sexual, the religious sense subservient to the erotic delight or suffering received at the hands of the beloved. In the third section the tone intensifies. The voice is fierce with the energy of having broken through the frozen stasis — “My cold heart like a spectre / In a rose encircled shroud” — required of female beauty. “But I have plucked you, O miraculous Flower of my desire,” writes the poet, “And crushed between my lips the burning petals of your mouth” (*Poems*, pp. 204, 212).

The petals, a figure for the beloved lips, dissolve into the literal and fiercely desired mouth. Yet in the following poem, “The Lute Song,” sexuality, grasped so avidly, eats into the core of the self. Almost like Oothoon in Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, the voice in Naidu’s poem cries to be wiped out, nullified, so that the self might reflect the purity of a male lover. Oothoon’s position was starker: raped by Bromion she must cry out to Theotormon’s eagle to tear her breast. In the bloody place left in her body she longs to reflect the “image of Theotormon.”⁹ The woman raped, instead of turning outwards in anger at her assailant, first turns in shame to herself, wounding herself, seeking to cross out her own existence or to mirror, in her doubly wounded flesh, the image of the beloved. In Naidu’s poem the violence against the self is incipient. First the self must mirror the beloved. Her eyes “shadowless wells of desire” — almost a carry over of Symons’s image for Sarojini’s own eyes — must bear the beloved’s face to perfection. The self is effectively nullified. But the ferocity of passion, having taken this first step, now abates. The voice asks forgiveness. Desire overwhelms the speaker; she has trespassed her own bounds: “Forgive me the sin of my eyes” begins the sixth poem, which then flows into a list of wrongs. The speaker has “assailed,” “encircled,” “oppress’d,” even “ravished” the beloved. Now comes the time for atonement. She will brew her own soul into wine to make him strong; through the strength of love, she will “fashion” him into a god. There is no irony in the voice; the sentiment, unflawed by desperation, is lifted straight out of a tradition that advocates worship of the husband as if he were a god. Eroticism, once powerful, is again covert as the poet writes in the cloying language of mysticism: “You are

the substance of my breath / And you the mystic pang of Death” (*Poems*, p. 217).

The speaker’s true state, with her desire so severely repressed, sublimated into a pseudo-mysticism, becomes clear in a painful poem called “The Secret.” Here (the poem is a portion of *The Temple*) the speaker is *already dead*. Passion unrequited has killed her. People come forward to her bearing tribute, powerless to tell of the death within her. In a perfect masking of her post-humous condition, she is visible to them, as if completely alive. The cruelty of desire has killed her. Her throbbing heart was flung “to serve wild dogs for meat.” Now she must fend off, as best she can, “the ravening fire / Of my own heart’s desire.” Terror at the impasse she has reached breaks the voice open, and it turns yet again, now to celebrate the “passionate sin” for which punishment must be craved, a punishment which paradoxically serves to affirm a trespassing passion. In a poem called “The Sanctuary” the poet writes:

My proud soul shall be unforgiven
For a passionate sin it will ne’er repent,
And I shall be doomed, O Love and driven
And hurled from Heaven’s high battlement,

Down through the deep ages, alone, unfrightened,
Flung like a pebble thro’ burning space;
But the speed of my fall shall be sweet and brightened
By the memoried joy of your radiant face! (*Poems*, p. 229)

What a fall the woman suffers for her passion, dropping through the gulf of time; yet her self coheres to her passion and its burning space, heat reinforcing the “passionate sin” the stanzas celebrate. Desire, outlawed by the world, defines the speaker, yet the last stanza of the poem reveals a curious change. While the self falls through the immense gulf, the male beloved is held secure in “God’s mystic garden.” He must be preserved blameless, as a “saint even.” His lack of sexual response, his chilling neutrality, now come to stand as virtue while she, fierce and tender, must be thrust out. Yet one line stands in relief: “My outlawed spirit shall crave no pardon” (*Poems*, p. 230). Standing outside the laws of the world, she gathers strength through defiance, the very strength the political woman needs to work against colonial will.

Her romantic torment then would seem to create a shock of resistance that the political self can draw on.

Yet *The Temple* does not end there. Gender works its strange corruptions. In the very last stanza of the long poem we discover a poem entitled "Devotion" where the previous image of female flesh thrown to the dogs returns with a vengeance. There is masochism here, a total rejection by the voice of the outlawed self. All her defiance dissolved, she throws herself at the beloved: she is his; he may do what he will. The heroic drop through space has lapsed into this all-too-earthly desecration:

Take my flesh to feed your dogs if you choose,
 Water your garden trees with my blood if you will,
 Turn my heart into ashes, my dreams into dust —
 Am I not yours, O love to cherish or to kill? (*Poems*, p. 231)

The poetic self is in the grip of a sexuality so atavistic that desire equals destruction. Effectively, there were no more poems.

Naidu's political self, however, flourished. In 1925 she reached the height of her fame when she was the first Indian woman elected President of the National Congress. At her inauguration, she was led to the podium in a great procession that included Mahatma Gandhi and both Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru. With the eyes of the nation on her she acknowledged the honour done to her as a "generous tribute to Indian womanhood." Indeed, as a woman, she wanted nothing more than to propose a "most modest domestic programme." It was one she was willing to die for: "to restore to India her true position as the supreme mistress in her own home. . . . It will be my [l]ovely though difficult task, through the coming year, to set my mother's house in order . . ."10

What could be a more fitting desire for a feminist and Nationalist? The image of the maternal home, the locus of earliest nurturing, consoles and releases, inspiring confidence in the future. Not that this feminine image should be misinterpreted as quiescent, for Naidu goes on in her speech to argue for resolute, even war-like measures to combat the British, measures that were in conflict with Gandhi's posture of total *ahimsa*. She wanted compulsory military training for all children, remobilization of the villages, and the organization of urban workers so that both

women and men could arm themselves. This arming of the nation against colonialism seemed to her a "natural and indispensable auxiliary of political emancipation." It seemed to her that there was no other way of overthrowing the enemy that lay both within and without: those "deadly forces of repression that challenge our human rights of liberty."¹¹ Now the passage of her resistance seems clear. The confrontation with the sometimes tragic bonds of her own culture empowered her psyche, permitting it to attack the public bonds laid down by a colonizing power. If there is regret that her poetry did not keep pace with her life, it is equally possible to sense that her private and at times agonizing conflicts, as recorded in poetry, were crucial to the integrity of her living voice.

NOTES

- 1 H. S. L. Polak, H. N. Brailsford, and Lord Pethick-Lawrence, *Mahatma Gandhi*, fwd. and appreciation by H. E. Sarojini Naidu, Governor of the United Provinces (London: Odhams Press, 1949), p. 7.
- 2 Eleanor Morton, *Women behind Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1954), p. 158.
- 3 Sarojini Naidu, *The Golden Threshold*, int. Arthur Symons (London: William Heinemann, 1909), p. 9.
- 4 Sarojini Naidu, *The Sceptered Flute; Songs of India*, The Collected Poems of Sarojini Naidu (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1928), p. 53; hereafter cited parenthetically as *Poems*.
- 5 Arthur Symons, *Silhouettes*, 2nd ed. (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), p. 13 ("Morbidezza"). "Maquillage" is included in *Poetry of the Nineties*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1970), pp. 44-45.
- 6 See Padmini Sengupta, *Sarojini Naidu: A Biography* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966), pp. 48-49.
- 7 Quoted in Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, 2nd ed. (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1973), p. 44.
- 8 Sarojini Naidu, *Speeches and Writings* (Madras: Natesan, 1918), p. 16.
- 9 William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 198: "Rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect / The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast."
- 10 Pattabhi Sitaramayya, ed., *The History of the Indian National Congress, 1: 1885-1935* (Bombay: Padma Publications, 1946), p. 290; from the message published by the President-Elect in October 1925.
- 11 A. M. Zaidi and S. G. Zaidi, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress, 9: 1925-1929* (New Delhi: S. Chand, 1980), pp. 30, 31.