

ESSAY

# The world of Sarojini Naidu

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE

This is the first segment of a comprehensive essay on the celebrated Indian poet and politician who remains a point of reference in the history of the Indian subcontinent. --- Literary Editor

FRANCIS Bacon, philosopher and great essayist of the sixteenth century, once spoke thus about the classification of books: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; That is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly and with diligence and attention."

*Sarojini Naidu: A Biography* (by Padmini Sengupta and published by Asian Publishing House, India in 1966) falls in the last category. Furthermore, this is one of those books that inspire a reader to know more and more about a person whose life and work have been narrated in every dimension powerfully and in such amazing detail. Padmini Sengupta has known Sarojini Naidu closely and combined with her high erudition, she has very ably taken the readers on a journey into the tumultuous period of history of which the protagonist was an integral and inseparable part. So overwhelming and arduous has been her task that she comments, "Though I know I am inadequate to portray so magnificent a character, I have at least fulfilled my deep desire to write this biography, and to depict a great and good character to the present and future generations of India .... It is impossible for one individual to do justice to a personality which presented so many scintillating facets to the world, and there must be many features of her life which I have not been alike to probe into or fathom...."

Padmini Sengupta's portrayal of *Sarojini Naidu* as she evolves into a great leader next to Mahatma Gandhi in British ruled India unfolds her life the way a bud blooms into a full grown flower. One feels as if every petal opens up at a time and is distinct in its own colour and fragrance, depicting her multi-dimensional personality. *Sarojini Naidu* is neatly and beautifully divided into six long parts, each of which is crowned with a quotation --- the great leader's poetry, which is a unique style for opening each part. Sengupta herself manifests a poet's mind as she names the parts by choosing words that are lyrical from Sarojini Naidu's poetry. Part one entitled *The Pulse of the Morning* commences with a verse from her second book of poetry called *The Bird of Time*, published in 1912. The verse narrates the beauty and splendor of spring and therefore is called *The Joy of Springtime*.

Both Naidu's father Aghorenath and mother Varada Sundari were highly talented. That Sarojini was to be a renowned poet pulsating with emoting and ideas not only in her creative work of literary purists but also bring those down to her cherished and broader goal of working for her motherland was very natural as her father was not only a scientist of fame both at home and abroad but also a distinguished poet both in Urdu and Bengali. Sarojini was much admired for the tonal quality of her voice, which assuredly was a gift she inherited from her mother, who was a renowned singer. When she was a girl at school in a village in east Bengal she is said to have won the Viceroy's Gold Medal for singing. Varada Sundari also wrote beautiful lyrics in Bengali. Such was the atmosphere in their home, where "there was music, drama and verse, dreaming of great achievement, building of fantastic castles, and above all, the human touch, always present, of catering to friends, rich or poor, beggar or prince. And home, in this rich and artistic background was born and bred Sarojini, together with her brothers and sisters."

Hers was a home where one could hear a number of languages. Although it was a Bengali family, Sarojini and her siblings never spoke Bengali. In fact, Sarojini could never read Bengali. The atmosphere at home was enriched with multiple elements, among which a profusion of languages used was one. Sarojini showed early signs of being a dreamer, a nature lover, lover of colours and bright hues. "She was not only colourful herself, but brought and took colour with her wherever she went. Sapphire and gold, scarlet and blue, topaz and saffron, red and purple, these hues and all the colours of the rainbow lit up her poetry, her lectures, her witty repartee at the many soirees and interviews she held, her letters and conversation."

Two events from Sarojini Chattopadhyaya's childhood are worth narrating, for they are as fascinating as her whole life whether during normal times or in pleasure or pain. As a child she was rather reluctant to learn English (which later on joyfully became her 'own' tongue) that her father Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya wanted her to be proficient in. Getting punished for the apparent indifference, later on she started learning it and "spoke to her parents only in English through her mother spoke back to her in Hindustani." Another event in her pre-teenage is more interesting. Being a serious scientist, although a distinguished poet in Urdu and Bengali, Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya wanted Sarojini to be a great mathematician or a scientist. She writes, "One day, when I was eleven, I was signing over a sum in Algebra: it wouldn't come right, but instead a whole poem came to me suddenly. I wrote it down. From that day my poetic career began."

While in Cambridge at a young age, Sarojini Chattopadhyaya was fortunate to have come in contact with renowned critics like Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symons, both of whom were impressed by her verses written while she was still in her teens and extended their guidance to have her fully bloom as a poet. Having gone through her poems, Edmund Gosse commented, "The verses which Sarojini had entrusted to me were skilful in form, correct in grammar and blameless in sentiment, but they had the disadvantage of being totally without individuality".... He could



hear the mocking bird of English poets in them and so he advised her 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 Indian poet of the Deccan, not a clever machine-made imitator of the English classics."

Sarojini 'immediately accepted' Gosse's advice and took to writing verses in that light. Soon three of her collections of poetry, *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing* (1917), appeared and drew much appreciation both at home and abroad for which Sarojini gave the credit to Gosse for showing her the way. Gosse describes his first meeting with Sarojini as follows: "When Sarojini Chattopadhyaya -- as she then was -- first made her appearance in London, she was a child of sixteen years, but as unlike the usual English maiden of that age as a lotus or a cactus is unlike a lily of the valley. She was already marvelous in mental maturity, amazingly well-read, and far beyond a Western child in all her acquaintance with the world."

This is certainly one of the best compliments Sarojini ever got from her mentor and spoke volumes of her intellectual abilities. Her early poems were mostly lyrical, romantic in nature, with an element of music in them. Nevertheless she was always preoccupied with the thought of going beyond it and there lay her ecstasy for doing something for the people, for her country when she was still young. Advised by Edmund Gosse, Sarojini next based her writings on the magnificent environs of

Hyderabad, her hometown in her childhood days and also after she got married. She was fascinated by the Muslim culture in all its aspects and that is probably how she developed her passion for Hindu-Muslim unity, which first grew at her father's house, a home that was open to all. She says about her home town: "The tradition of Islam has truly been carried out for two hundred years, that tradition of democracy that knows how out of its legislation to give equal rights and privileges to all communities whose destinies it controls." Elsewhere she says, "The first accents I heard were in the tongue of the Amir of Kusru. All my early association were formed with the Mussalman men and Mussalman women of my city. My first playmates were Mussalman children." Thus "she steeped herself in Islamic poetry and culture." She found the 'lyric genius of Islam' in Rumi, which she described as immortal. She is so much engrossed in her

birthplace that she says:

*She how the speckled sky burns like a pigeon's throat  
Jewelled with embers of opal and peridote  
See the white river that flashes and scintillates,  
Curved like a tusk from the mouth of the city gates.*

She further describes her favourite river Musi and its surroundings where one must

*Hark, from the minaret, how the Muezzin's call  
Floats like a battle-flag over the city of wall.*

Although Sarojini Naidu was in the forefront of the struggle for the emancipation of women, a cause for which she wandered the length and breadth of her country relentlessly, she nurtured her penchant for the beautiful women behind the 'purdah world' in their exotic surroundings. She spoke of these women as living "in a world within a world." She was so profoundly fascinated by colour, beauty, grandeur and the serenity of things and people around her that she all her life she remained an aesthete and a connoisseur, a quality that she brought on to her goal of life, that is, into politics. Her life has been thus exemplary of a philosophy that underlines virtues in the making of good. In the same vein she has given expression to her sentiment regarding the custom of suttee (immolating oneself along with one's deceased husband) in one of her poems. She praised the women's love for their husbands and then again questioned if men of today deserve this or not. Although one may sense an apparent contradiction in her feelings and her mission in life, nevertheless one can understand it if one looks at it in a practical way, which is only so human. Sengupta wonders and, along with her, the readers, ask: what made Sarojini Naidu so great? Rather the question could have been: who moulded her into being what she eventually became? She led a contented life in marriage. Her greatest joy lay in the fact that "her husband realised her genius, not only as a poet but as an orator. He allowed her freely to develop both these talents, for despite revelling in her home life, there seemed to have been longings within her which she could not satisfy, and for which she was compelled to have an outlet."

What a gift he was in Sarojini's life! Many a woman in that period and more so in the present-day world would undoubtedly envy her. Bubbling over with energy, enthusiasm, conviction of life culminating in the unity of people of all religions, castes and creeds, she transcended the barrier of being a patriot only to become an internationalist.

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TRIBUTE

# Memorializing the Magus

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TO claim any degree of personal association with Dr. K. S. Murshid on my part would be a bit of an untenable audacity, even though he has figured in my private mythology for almost half a century now. By the time I entered the Department of English, University of Dacca (as we spelt it then), he was already a part of a halo-ed legend. Even as a high school student at a small town outside Dhaka, I heard my English teachers talk excitedly about his role in the 1961 Tagore centenary celebrations. Pakistan was as usual in the tight grip of a Martial Law regime determined to stamp out any perceived threat to the tenuous ideology which held its "two wings" together. After all, less than ten years earlier, it was badly jolted by the state language controversy. Understandably, our fascination for Tagore appeared to the state ideologues not only as a sign of dangerous dissension but also a clear index of the subversive Bengali psyche. The administrative apparatus swung into action and a media campaign in the press and radio was launched against Tagore. The official intelligentsia, considering caution to be the better part of valor, took cover, putting the Tagore centenary in jeopardy. Among the few intrepid Tagore lovers who dared to go against the official line and stood up for the poet were Dr. Sarwar Murshid and a few of his Dhaka University colleagues. They pushed the centenary program through with an understand heroism which, one feels, did never receive the accolades that were actually due.

The battle-lines had been drawn more clearly by the time we entered the university as first year B.A. Honors students in the autumn of 1966. The political idea for which our fathers' generation had put up a bitter fight and made enormous sacrifices proved to be hollow at the end. The socio-economic utopia so alluringly promised receded like a mirage to an unreachable distance. In no time at all, the evil troika of the army, the bureaucracy and self-serving politicians that usurped state power evacuated the Pakistan ideology of every bit of significance and validity.

For many, like the National Professor Abdur Razzaq, the disillusionment set in early. However, there were others who would cling to their still-born dream till the bitter end. Among them, we discovered as soon as we entered the university, was the reigning head of the English department at that period. A vastly learned man and scholar, he was, nevertheless, a staunch upholder of the concept and the spirit of Pakistan and an unabashed intellectual stalwart of the servile Monem Khan regime blindly loyal to General Ayub's army government at the centre.

Under the stern tutelage of its Macaulay-esque head, the English department, we found, had turned into a strange bird testifying to an internal form of colonial hybridity. The class lists were a virtual roll-call of the scions (mostly female) of the bigwigs of the provincial administration, and a large number of them spoke Urdu and Punjabi and of course English in thick Urdu or Punjabi slurs. The rest were mostly self-hating locals who swore and flouted their ignorance of anything Bengali at every available opportunity. The syllabuses contained the standard titles from the English literary canon, but literature was no longer the central focus because the department had reconfigured itself, first into a breeding farm of budding CSPs, and second, into a finishing school for their would-be spouses. Those who came to the department to study literature seemed to have come to the wrong place. The head of the department taught us Iliad, but Homer rarely featured in his lectures. The classes inevitably turned into lessons in English phonetics with endless jokes about the quirks of the Bengal enunciation of English consonants and vowels. These jokes of course never failed to elicit jeering giggles from our (mostly female) Urdu and Punjabi-speaking classmates.

Looking back, one perceives how during the Pakistan era the department had turned itself into a virtual enemy territory for literary creativity and aspiration in any form. The list of talents for whom the department failed to provide a nurturing environment and whom it exiled to alternative arenas of endeavor was long: it ranged from Munier Chowdhury, Abu Zafar Obaidullah, Shamsur Rahman, Syed Shamsul Haque and Monjur-e-Mowla down to Hayat Saif, Abul Hasan and Kashinath Roy. I also had come to the department for the craziest possible reason: I, in my infinite folly, wanted to emulate the effete aestheticism of the Swinburne-spouting heroes of Budhadev Bose's romantic fiction! I realized right away that an incubator for hatching CSPs was definitely not a terrain where aestheticism of any variety could sprout.

I, however, survived, and I loved my survival, though I doubt if he was even aware of it, to Dr. K. S. Murshid. The presence of



KS Murshid

Dr. Murshid in the Department provided the much-needed psychological assurance that the English Department was not, after all, a univocal world. To begin with, radiant in his white silk punjabi, he provided a glowing visual contrast to the *pucca sahib* department head who insisted on wearing dark suits even in the sweltering heat of a Dhaka summer. We found out, to our immense relief, that outside the classrooms we were allowed to speak to him in Bengali: in fact, he himself would break into Bengali (characteristically chaste and crisp) when he found us struggling with the mock-British intonation we had learned elsewhere. Also, we heard with relish the rumors of how he subtly but tellingly put down those among us who seemed to resent, even deny, their Bengali roots.

Dr. Murshid taught us John Donne. The name of the poet was not unknown: he was the same "Don" whom Tagore's Ami Ray admired. However, Tagore's lyrical rendition of the opening lines of 'The Canonization' had hardly prepared us for the reeling pyrotechnics of wit and logic that John Donne was all about. The forbidding label of a "Metaphysical Poet" did not help either. The feedback from the senior students of the department scripted Donne as a sadistic quiz-master and Dr. Murshid as an inscrutable magus.

For the young men and women of our group, some of whom were already dabbling in the endless inscrutabilities of Modernist poetry, Dr. Murshid's Donne worked like magic. No over-simplification or watering down of the mysteries of metaphysical poetry formed part of Dr. Murshid's pedagogic strategy. He equipped us right and then forced us to meet Donne and his formidable cohorts up front: the encounter proved to be not only exhilarating but also transformative.

His own elegance, dash, and arched wit seemed to find a perfect match in Donne's. We were not exactly amused, however, when we came to learn, after the course was over, that some of our beautiful young female classmates had already formed a secret admirers' club for Dr. Murshid!

He was, as can be guessed, in his true elements when he took up W.B. Yeats with us in the M.A modern literature course. Many of us were familiar with the work he had done on the Irish writer, who counted among the greatest poetic voices of the twentieth

century. Consequently, we came to his lecture with high expectations, and he never let us down. His lectures exemplified what profound scholarship combined with a genuine passion for an author could bring to the experience of reading poetry. A part of his work focused on Yeats' women, and inspired by the poet's hopeless adoration of Ms. Maud Gonne, many of us embarked on a desperate search for our own femmes fatale. Indeed, W.B. Yeats, read under Dr. Murshid's guidance, seemed a revelation.

It was, of course, a revelation untainted by politics or history. In this part of the globe, the texts were still ensconced in their inviolable auto telic heaven, revealing their secrets only to the New Critical votaries chanting mantras of paradox and irony and so on. As the decade wore on, it was growing increasingly difficult to shelter the sacred realms of poetry and literature from the various local and global political impingements. Spectres of unsavoury socio-political philosophies came crowding in to haunt adulatory readings of Yeats, Pound and Eliot. It was no longer possible to read Yeats without referring to the Boiler, the Irish Black shirts and Conor Cruise O'Brien. All the symphony of Pound's Cantos could not synchronize the bizarre notes of II Duce's unholy exhortations. Naturally, when, later, I took up Yeats and Eliot for my own doctoral work, I could not read them in the same way as my mentors had.

Obviously, my portrait of Professor Murshid as predominantly an academician is a severely truncated representation of a personality noted for its infinite variety. In his long and distinguished professional life, he left his mark as an administrator of superior capabilities, a diplomat with dazzling fitness, an editor of impeccable taste and judgment, and an insightful interpreter of cultural maladies past and present. These are, however, tales of other narrators to tell. But then, any representation of such a man tends, at the end of the day, to be reductive.

Let me revert to the personal note in the conclusion. I could never muster enough courage to approach Dr. Murshid with a sheaf of my unpublished poems. Both my friends Abul Hasan and I were convinced that our poems were not yet ready for his keenly discriminating taste. However, I distinctly remember, in the viva voce for our B.A Honors final, he introduced me to Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqi, the external examiner, as "an upcoming young poet." He knew! It excited, and confused, me so much that I ended up bungling the crucial interview!

PROFESSOR SELIM SARWAR, POET AND CRITIC, IS A LEADING VOICE IN STUDIES OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN BANGLADESH

# Passage on a Monsoon Day

MUNEERA PARBEEN

CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK

He breathed fear onto the poor people in the villages around. He was the toy-dragon in his abode in absence of all able men gone to fight for the country.

Only a few men stood in his way. Mollah headed that list. The morning Meena returned to her village, her grandfather was not sure how safe it was. Rumour was that the army was on its way to Chandanpur. There was so much work to do; the Pakistan army was burning everything that fall in their way. They burnt down any houses they found books in. They picked up women and young boys.

Mollah had put most of his books and small valuables in a wooden chest and buried it underneath the earthen floor of his home. His oldest daughter's son Ismail helped the old man do that. They covered up the hole with soil, smoothed the floor and put his four poster bed back on top of it.

Ismail would take the remaining books on an oxen cart to his own house further up north. Ismail had a limp from his childhood and had not gone to the war. He helped where else he could.

"Don't worry about me nana. I will leave when evening falls," he reassured the old man that day.

Mollah's family was generations of real mullahs - the surname had not been theirs without reason. They were all highly educated unlike the new breed of opportunistic cap-wearing zealots who only proclaimed their faith to terrorise the weak.

As Meena and the other women cooked and rested in his house, Mollah slowly circled the area around his own on the lookout against trouble.

As soon as Ikramullah and his goons noticed the smoke from the cooking in his yard, all hell would break lose. He knew this. It was a good thing it was Friday and the likes of Ikramullah were likely away at the larger mosque in the bazaar for Jummah prayers till late noon.

Seven women with ten children in tow had arrived with Meena at mid-morning. Mollah's heart had broken at the sight

of his pregnant granddaughter. Her clothes were dirty, her eyes ghostly and it was visible that the child had not eaten properly in a while.

"Dadu, we had nothing to eat but chira since yesterday, we need to eat," was the first thing Meena said on arrival.

"There is rice in the tin under my bed, there must be vegetables in the garden," he had responded automatically. "Ask someone to light a fire in the stove. The dry wood is under the kitchen shed."

Turning to Ismail, he was about to say something when the young man said,

"I know what to get."

Pulling down the large gamcha hanging on the clothesline across the courtyard, Ismail had rushed down to the river calling out to Raju as he left.

The rivers were roaring full from the ceaseless rain. The monsoons had been generous. It had become the Bangalis' saviour. Villages surrounded by tributaries of rivers on both sides were not easily accessible by road. The Pak army tended to avoid such places. It was hard enough moving with ammunition in the never ending rain.

Nature had also been kind. The rivers were abundant with fish in a year people were scattered everywhere with no access to their regular sources of food.

"I have never seen so much fish in the rivers Raju. Not in my twenty five years, just look at them!" Ismail said to Raju as he lifted the border of his lungi, hiking it up to tie it around his waist before entering the water.

"Watch me," he called out to the boy as he lowered the spread out gamcha like a net into the water. He pushed it forward under the water and then lifted it, letting the water sieve out of the cotton garment. He came back to the shore to show the tiny river prawns and other tiny fish trapped on his gamcha.

Raju lifted the border of his lungi and holding out the drop of the garment like a pocket for Ismail to drop the fish into his lap. A few rounds later, there was enough.

"Run off home now and give them to your sister," he said