

LITERARY TRADITIONS

English in Malaysia and Singapore

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THE young editors of a student magazine, *The New Cauldron* (1949-60), the official organ of the Raffles Society of the University of Malaya in Singapore, in their youthful idealism and unflagging optimism, wrote in their editorial column, "National Unity," for the Trinity Term issue of 1949-1950:

Professor T.H. Silcock, in his pamphlet 'Dilemma in Malaya', says that 'Self-government implies a self to do the governing, and it is our responsibility to bring that self into existence.' Before that 'self' can emerge we must have a solidified concoction of all the socially, economically, politically and culturally disunited peoples in Malaya. Can we achieve that solidarity? Assuredly we can. The process of transforming different peoples with diverse ideas into a single unit may take a few decades but ultimate unity is ours.

The rest of the editorial is devoted to articulating the principles that would enable the emerging nation to attain the desired unity: equality of races and equal citizenship for all, for "There is no room for discrimination in a ship upon turbulent waves of suspicion"; undivided loyalty to Malaya, particularly by members of the migrant races and, finally, the evolution of a common language. On the subject of language, the starry-eyed editors further wrote, in their editorial article, "The Way to Nationhood," for the Hilary Term issue of 1949-1950:

The people of Malaya are a mixed crowd, but they possess most of the requisites for nationhood. Time must be given for a common language to be evolved. This will come about through increased contact between the different communities. A Malayan language will arise out of contributions these communities will make to the linguistic melting pot. The emerging language will then have to wait for a literary genius who will give it a voice and a soul, a service which Dante performed for the Italian language.

It is important to begin this article by quoting from these young writers at length because they were some of the "pioneers" of what was then a nascent Malayan literary tradition in English, and what is now acknowledged as modern Malaysian and Singaporean English language literary tradition. In their vigour, vibrancy and valour, these writers embodied the imagination and spirit of all fellow writers in the medium, and even perhaps of their entire generation. The writers were talking about self-determination, self-governing, solidarity, forging of a common language and creating a united and unified nation. But which nation did they have in mind? They were all living in Singapore as students of the only university of the colony, University of Malaya, established in Singapore in 1949, the year these magazines and editorials were published. They must have been aware that Singapore was no longer part of British Malaya at the time, as it had been separated from the rest of the Federation which was established with eleven of the other Malayan states in 1948. The writers would have also been aware that equal citizenship and the possibility of creating a new language for establishing unity and solidarity between the diverse races in the emerging Malayan nation were far from the reality.

In 1957 Malaya was given independence,



Shirley Geok-lin Lim

but Singapore still remained a Crown Colony and continued to tread a separate path. In the *Merdeka* or Independence Constitution, *bahasa* was accorded the status of national language, although it was agreed that for the first ten years "Chinese, Tamil and English could continue to be used as working languages with the position to be reviewed thereafter." A provision was, however, also introduced in the Constitution that stated that after ten years Malay would be the country's sole official language.

Singapore was allowed self-government in 1958 and later independence in 1963.

Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore joined the Federation of Malaya and formed the new Federation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963. This merger between Singapore and Malaysia, after a period of separation, came to be seen in some quarters as "a marriage of equals" and "happy marriage." But the happy marriage soon turned sour as differences between the Singapore Government led by Lee and the Federal Government became irreconcilable.

Singapore emerged as a sovereign nation on 9 August 1965.

A Tradition with Two Tributaries

I have given a synopsis of the turbulent political events from 1946 to 1965 to enable readers, especially those who are not familiar with the history of colonial Malaya and later Malaysia and Singapore, to appreciate the geopolitical milieu in which the tradition of English writing began, and continued to develop, in the two countries, first as one and then as two tributaries stemming from the same source. It was initiated by a coterie of writers, who were young, English-educated, undergraduate students at the University of Malaya, mostly coming from a middle-class, and many of them from a migrant, background. They were working under a unique set of circumstances and mainly sailing against the current. They began writing when the whole country was in a ferment, with clashing ideologies and competing visions of the nation creating such an explosive environment that their homeland eventually could not hold together, and gave birth to two sovereign nations. They were Malayans and yet they chose to write in an "alien" language, a language that the colonisers had used to execute their imperial licence and to subjugate their fellow people body and soul. The editorial of *The New Cauldron*, for the

Michaelmas Term of 1955, argued:

We have assessed previous undergraduate attempts at the creation of an artificial language by an arbitrary mixture of phrases drawn from the existing languages spoken in Malaya. We regret to say that this language, *Engmalchin* [acronym for English, Malay, Chinese and Indian], as its advocates termed it, is a failure if only because of its self-conscious artificiality and the failures of its 'sires' to understand that language can never be created by edict.... The crisis lies in the lack of a common cultural tradition out of which artists can draw their inspiration and which can serve as a common pool of references. Once this is found, however shallow it may be, the language problem vanishes. So long as we understand and appreciate the same values and 'monuments' of unaging intellect' the languages in which these values and monuments are expressed do not matter.

The Penang Writers circle, in their manifesto of 1969, also expressed a similar view of creating a new national identity by synthesising the values of the different races and creating a set of common values, which would be inclusive and reflective of the practices of all Malayan people:

It is the imperative duty of our writers to reflect deeply the rich and varied life of our multinational people, help to pose correctly the multifold problems confronting our young nation and create a rich modern literature that reflects our national identity... so that out of the plethora of our traditions and customs it is possible to distil the essence of the uncreated conscience of our peoples.

The writers chose English as their vehicle mainly from an "unassailable logic" (Achebe's phrase) of convenience. Being English educated, they had no choice but to use English to verbalise their imagination. They had no express political objective behind their choice of medium. In a recent interview with me, the father-figure of Singapore literature, Edwin Thumboo, explained:

The point is that all this [childhood memories] was increasingly stored and recalled in English. English was the only language in which I had some strength. As time went by, Teochew was used less and the little Malay I had, receded. Meanwhile English grew, systematically, daily, as my world grew. If I wrote poetry, and I wanted to, it had to be in English; there was no alternative. As I have said more than once, poets do not choose their language; the language chooses them.

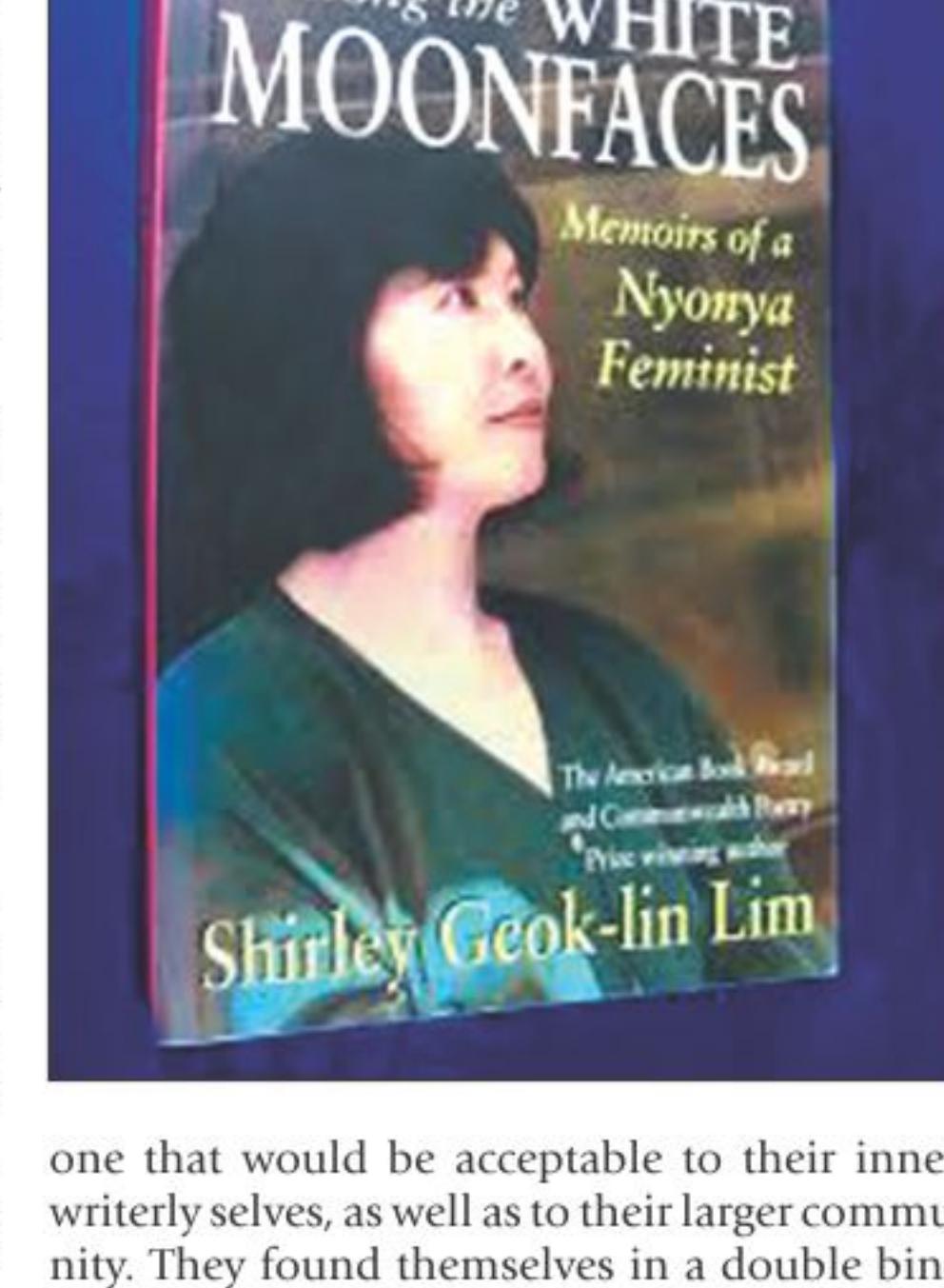
Earlier, EeTiang Hong made the same point in an interview with Kirpal Singh: "One writes in the language one is most confident in." But although they came to choose their medium from a personal necessity rather than from any political reason, English being their only medium of expression, a medium on which their world, imagination and creativity depended, one without which they could look neither backwards nor forwards nor "seize the day," obviously they came to love it dearly and become deeply passionate about it. Shirley Geok-lin Lim's poem, "Lament," captures this sentiment succinctly and powerfully:

I have been faithful
Only to you,
My language. I choose you
Before country,
... before
Lover and husband,

Yes, if need be,
Before child in arms,
Before history and all
It makes, belonging,
Rest in the soil,
Although everyone knows
You are not mine.
They wink knowingly
At my stupidity –
I, stranger, foreigner,
Claiming rights to
What I have no right –
Sacrifice, tongue
Broken by fear.

Lim's poem shows the depth of her commitment to the English language, her sole vehicle for creativity, which she places above country, lover, husband and child. But the poem also exposes a problem which is endemic to all non-native writers of the language, i.e. they are "strangers" and "foreigners" to it; English is but their second or "father" tongue; and, to make matters worse, it was the language used for formulating the axioms of imperialism.

The writers were alert to this issue from the outset and tried to find a suitable solution to it,



one that would be acceptable to their inner writerly selves, as well as to their larger community. They found themselves in a double bind in that they were trying to restore freedom from the colonial rule, redeem their people and cultures from dehumanising oppression of the British, and yet they were using the same coloniser's language to express and articulate their imagination. They were vexed by the fact that their creative medium had its roots elsewhere, and being Malayans they could not draw on the resources of that other culture; Malaya was outside the orbit of Anglo-European cultures, so the only way they could use the language and yet put the agonies associated with it to rest was to detach the language from its source culture and transplant it in the local soil. Only by infusing "local blood," local verve, local colour and local spirit into the language, could they make it their own; by transforming, modifying and readjusting it to the local context could they make it "bear the weight and texture of a different experience" (Achebe's words). They had to look both inward and outward to achieve this formidable goal. They had to baptise the

language in the pool of their personal imagination, rhythm and idiosyncrasy so that the language could revitalise itself, and through a process of gestation, mutation and refashioning, develop into an idiolect. In addition to "personalising" the language, they had to look outward to make sure that they were using the speech that was about them; the speech that was being used by the local people on the street, in the market place, or in their daily business; a speech that they were familiar with from their surroundings, and not from the poets and writers or textbooks that they would have read.

This was, however, not an easy task as there was no local tradition to emulate and writers were basically brought up on English literature. Their main inspiration came from Eliot, Yeats, Dylan Thomas, or earlier writers such as Shakespeare, Donne, Wordsworth, Keats, Dickens, Hardy, Austen or Hawthorne. So how could they suddenly break away from that and create a new aesthetic taste more attuned to the local culture? Their problem was compounded by the fact that there was no one culture in their society but many cultures. They could have benefited from their respective ethnic cultures, Indian, Chinese, or Malay, each of which had a long and resourceful past, but this was not possible as there was nothing common between their medium and their different inherited traditions to establish a continuity.

Therefore, to rise above imitative writing and to step out of the shadows of the literary "masters" proved to be excruciating. It required the writer to find the right synergy between the different forces at work in his/her writing, which was a matter of personal talent, confidence and experience. It is because of this, that when the tradition began and started growing, it was mostly confined to poetry. Poetry being intense, intrinsic and economical is dependent on the depth and ingenuity of the individual writer. But fiction and drama being more intricate and extrinsic, dealing with subject-matters that are larger than the self of the individual writer and his/her personal feelings, where s/he has to invent characters having unique shades and attributes as well as plots with multiple layers and multitudinous possibilities, are more difficult to construct or compose. Therefore, it took about twenty years or so for drama and fiction to emerge in the Malaysian-Singaporean tradition of writing from the time of its inception.

However, before literature could fully branch out into the different genres of fiction and drama, a sea change occurred in the literary scene with drastic developments in the political realm. In 1965 Malaysia and Singapore chose to tread different paths owing to intractable and irreconcilable differences on statecraft and nation building by the party leadership on two sides. The Causeway, which stood across the Straits of Johor and acted as a symbol of unity, immediately became a symbol of separation and political sovereignty of the two nations. All the apparatus of the state was put in place to control the movement of people and commodity. This meant literature which was hitherto seen as belonging to one fabric was suddenly split into two, with each having to traverse its own separate track.

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ESSAY

The world of Sarojini Naidu

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE

This is the penultimate segment of the article, the earlier two sections of which have appeared in the past fortnight.

--- Literary Editor

SAROJINI'S first encounter with Mahatma Gandhi is most amusing. It took place in London right before the First World War broke out in 1914. When Gandhi came to London from South Africa, Sarojini went to meet him. She found "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 tin of parched groundnuts and tasteless biscuits of dried plantain flour. I burst instinctively into happy laughter at the amusing and unexpected vision of a famous leader, whose name has already become a household word in our country. He lifted his eyes and laughed back at me, saying: 'Ah, you must be Mrs. Naidu! Who else dare to be so irreverent? Come in, and share my meal.'" Sarojini's answer was, 'No thanks, what an abominable mess it is.' This was the beginning of their lifelong friendship which flowered into real comradeship, and bore fruit in a long, long loyal discipleship, which never wavered for a single hour through more than thirty years of common service in the cause of India's freedom."

With the Nehrus, Sarojini had a very close relationship. She and her daughters were regarded as family members at Anand Bhawan in Allahabad. There have been innumerable letters written between Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarojini Naidu not only on matters political, which obviously was very normal and thus expected, but also personal that are manifestations of the deep bonds they had between them and also at the family level. In one her personal letters to Nehru, while describing her pain in her wrist for which her handwriting was all the more illegible, Sarojini wrote, 'Main sar-a-pas dard hun', quoting Iqbal literally. The poet in her remained kindled all the time even when she was in distress.

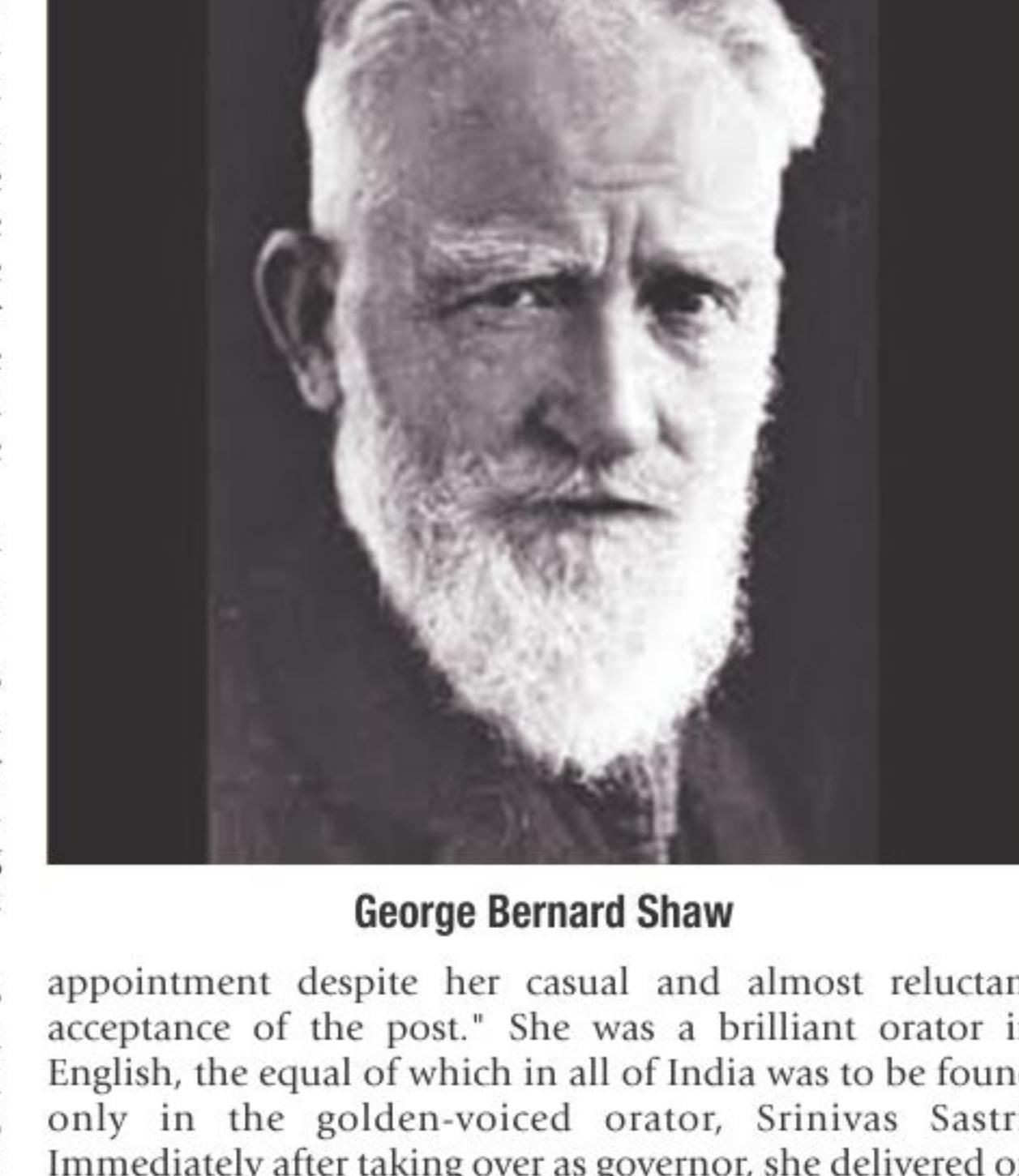
As an ambassador to America and Canada sent by Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini cast her spell the same way as she did when she went on a whirlwind tour of India. *The New York Times* in its notice on Sarojini's impending visit mentioned her fight for emancipation of women and said, "Mme Naidu is a singular combination of personal qualities. As a politician she can be stern and strategically minded, issuing ultimatum to the British rulers demanding Swaraj for her followers, and leading women's deputations for equal franchise. On the other hand, her songs and poems reveal only love for the beautiful in nature and

humanity." Sarojini was enchanted by America, especially California, New York, Cincinnati and some other places, in the way she loved Italy in her younger years. The only difference was that in the former, she got herself engaged in the people, their history and outlook in building up a nation and also took keen interest in the people who emigrated from India, whereas in the latter, she lost herself completely in the unspoilt beauty of the land, its people and in particular the women in their unending charm. While traveling in Italy, she was so overcome by all this that she wrote all about her feelings to Arthur Symons and in exactly the same way she wrote extensively about her enchanting America to Mahatma Gandhi. Both of them fondly called her misses 'love letters', though often times some of these were too long.

Though Sarojini never spoke Bengali nor learned to read and write it, for which her personal physician, Dr B C Roy, would often tease her, nevertheless "she was always a Bengali" as she proved it concerning matters related to Bengal and its people. Hyderabad and Calcutta occupied a special place in her heart but then again, she "had no provincial bias at any stage of her life. She always regarded India as one integral whole." But her being a Bengali was accentuated by her liking for Bengali meals and especially magoor machher jhol, -- a particular fish curry that she enjoyed very much.

She had a lot of friends in Bengal and with some families there she was so close that it was as if she herself was a member. One such family was that of C.R. Das. Basonti Devi (Mrs. C.R. Das) while talking of Sarojini's friendship with her with the author exuded much affection and nostalgia while reminiscing. Sarojini's friendships lasted throughout her life. However extremely busy Sarojini was in her involvement with people and work, she was very much a superb homemaker who kept an eye on every family member and every activity and anytime she could, she would take refuge in her cozy home called *The Golden Threshold* among her near and dear ones. She was the "cherished one in her household". It was the charm she exuded as a vibrant, natural person endowed with the mind of an aesthete that kept people devoted to her. This book is a living testament to her singularly glorious life into which a reader can plunge perennially, only to be awestruck more and more.

She became governor of Uttar Pradesh, the largest state of India, on the eve of independence -- a post she described as living the life of a caged bird. Even so, she infused full vitality into the job, keeping an eye on every aspect of it and the people of UP adored her and felt "honoured at possessing the first woman Governor of Independent India and were well aware of her brilliance, her abundant charm, her poetic talent and her distinguished career as a non-violent fighter for freedom. The press went into raptures over her



George Bernard Shaw

appointment despite her casual and almost reluctant acceptance of the post." She was a brilliant orator in English, the equal of which in all of India was to be found only in the golden-voiced orator, Srinivas Sastry. Immediately after taking over as governor, she delivered on extempore speech at the UP legislative Assembly that was termed more a "political thesis" than a "policy statement from the head of a province." Listeners felt a "Niagara of words flowed when she spoke, full of wit, humour sarcasm and satire."

She never failed to give due honour to deserving ones and at the same time being stern with those who would not initially be amenable to the good sides of an endeavour. She wielded the power to unite people even in most agonizing situations and proved to be the person who could truly "bring the lions and the lambs to lie down together in the green pastures which she created." She was a gifted orator with an extraordinary brilliance of words, expressions, body language, superior quality in English which all combined rendered her speeches lively and left her audience animated. The same effect was produced when she delivered her speeches in chaste Urdu, oftentimes using "high-flown" Persianized Urdu. This was something she picked up through her childhood association with Muslim culture in Hyderabad. In one of her innumerable letters to Nehru, the last line reads, "However--- let us go on churning the ocean till we evolve some supreme gift of Harmony -- but first let

us tide over Bakr Id which, Inshallah, we shall do!"

Another instance worth citing is Sarojini's address at the Lucknow Congress in 1916, where she exclaimed, "Let us then offer our lives unanimously as a tribute at the feet of the Motherland, for, as the great Prophet of Islam says, 'Under the feet of the Mother lies Paradise.'" There was wholehearted acclamation from the audience. Amarnath Jha, a young professor who later on became Vice-Chancellor of Allahabad University and was a regular visitor at Anand Bhawan along with Sarojini and others, wrote in the *Leader* of January 6, 1917: "The bird of the Deccan is sweet voiced. One imagines, as one listens to her, that the Kokil is singing. Her language is very well-chosen, and the spell she casts by her words is abiding." When Jha was scheduled to leave for England in 1933, Sarojini Naidu wrote letters of introduction to Bernard Shaw, Walter de la Mare, Humbert Wolfe, Mrs. Munro and Laurence Binyon for him. In fact, Shaw inquired of Mrs. Naidu to Prof. Jha when he was in London and expressed his regret at not being able to meet her when lately he was in India and she was in jail.

Once someone was a friend to her, s/he remained steadfast in friendship as she believed in keeping friends and not only in making them. Sarojini Naidu more often than not would have a series of speeches to deliver to various groups of people at various venues. On one such occasion where she addressed women in Madras, she said privately to two distinguished people: "I must get back soon to Hyderabad, where my husband is waiting with a stick to beat me, for setting such a bad example to the rest of Madras women." This assertion of hers, however amusing and said in a lighter vein, reveals the Indian Bengali mind of a woman. Here she emerges as a highly home and family loving person who misses her family life due to the unbounded call of her country.

When Sarojini Naidu was elected president of the All India Congress in 1925 succeeding Mahatma Gandhi, Aldous Huxley, the famous writer, visited India and came in close contact with Sarojini which experience he has described in his book *Jesting Pilate: The Diary of a Journey*, published in 1948. He says, "It has been our good fortune while in Bombay, to meet Sarojini Naidu, the newly President of the All-India Congress and a woman who combines in the most remarkable way great intellectual power with charm, sweetness, and courageous energy, a wide culture with originality, and earnestness with humour. If all politicians are like Mrs. Naidu, then the country is fortunate indeed." The Huxleys were guests of honour in a party that was held to congratulate Patel as the new speaker of the Legislative Assembly where Aldous Huxley, on