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# Dreams of a Poetess.

## A Subaltern Study of Sarojini Naidu's Poetry and Political Thought

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by

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Abstract: Sarojini Naidu was the spokesperson of the Indian National Congress during India's struggle for freedom. Her impromptu speeches, charming and dense with poetry, always impressed the masses. Jailed four times during the disobedience movements, she took part in several *satyagraha* actions and non-cooperation protests. She was one of the founder members of the All-India Women's Conference. She never considered herself a feminist and distanced herself from Western feminism. Nevertheless, she dedicated her entire life to the enhancement of the status of Indian women. Sarojini's controversial figure will be discussed in this paper, in order to analyse her role in Indian women's empowerment in a postcolonial and subaltern studies perspective.

"The dream of freedom is a spiritual condition that gives a value of courage or despair to whatever kind of bondage we must accept". To Leonardo [da Vinci] with his besetting dreams of wings beating the blue air the notion of freedom was a necessity. But it was personal freedom he meant, the joy of an uncaged mind! With his rich and prevailing qualities, he could create his freedom around him everywhere. What a wonderful power to evoke, what a perfect sanctuary within oneself from the turmoil and the anguish of the world...

(Letter to Padmaja Naidu, from Yeravda Jail, 22 July 1932).

### Introduction

Sarojini Naidu was the spokesperson of the Indian National Congress during India's struggle for freedom. She was a special friend of Gandhi, as their intense correspondence reveals. Known as "Bulbul-e-Hind", the "Nightingale of India", her impromptu speeches, charming and dense with poetry, deeply impressed the masses. Jailed four times during the disobedience movements, she took part in several *satyagraha* actions and non-cooperation protests. She was one of the founder

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members of the All-India Women's Conference. She travelled to many countries, spreading Gandhi's message and giving lectures on the status of Indian women.

Sarojini dedicated her entire life to the empowerment of Indian women. She advocated women's education, ending of child marriage, and remarriage of widows. Nevertheless, she never considered herself as feminist and distanced herself from Western feminism.

Her poetry has often been criticised for giving a traditionalist image of women's role, and for romanticizing women's status in ancient India, as she apparently does not question patriarchal power in her writing. In this paper Sarojini's poetry and prose will be compared to explore this apparent mismatch between her poems and her thought. Moreover, this paper traces an analysis of Sarojini's writings and actions in a "subaltern studies" perspective. More specifically, I will demonstrate how Sarojini's limits in her lyrics about women are the same limits we find in her political thought, which underlie her status of subaltern and her failure in her attempt to find an effective alternative path from western feminism. As Choudhury (2015) considers, the assessment of feminism in the "Global South" should not transcend the awareness of a cultural difference. On the contrary, difference and subjectivity can be used as important interpretative categories of feminism (see Choudhury 2015 and Chakravarty 2016). For this reason, I decided to adopt an approach that takes into account Sarojini's cultural background and individual experience, and then analyse her political thought on the role of women in India.

In the first section I will provide a brief overview of Sarojini's life and political experience. In the following biographical sketch, I refer to some of the many biographies written of her life: *Sarojini Naidu. A Biography*, by Padmini Sengupta (1966), *Sarojini Naidu*, by Makarand R. Paranjape (2012), *Sarojini Naidu. Her Life, Work and Poetry* by Vishvanath S. Naravane (2012), and Anu Kumar's more recent *Sarojini Naidu. The Nightingale and The Freedom Fighter* (2014). Other interesting sources are Eleanor Morton's *Women Behind Mahatma* (1954), though not solely dedicated to Sarojini, Sarojini's selected letters to Gandhi, in *The Mahatma and The Poetess*, edited by Mrinalini Sarabhai (1998), and *Selected Letters 1890s to 1940s*, edited by M. Paranjape (1996).

In the second section I will analyse Sarojini's political writings and speeches, to discuss Sarojini's role in the achievement of Indian women's empowerment. Her controversial poetry will be discussed in the third paragraph. Sarojini's collected poetry examined in this paper was taken from *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Birth of Time* (1912), *The Broken Wing* (1917), and *The Feather of a Dawn* (1961). Other compositions we find in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, edited by Paranjape, and *Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu* (1925).

More specifically, I will focus on those writings which were dedicated to women's empowerment, such as "Women's education and the Unity of India", "Indian women and the franchise", "Hindu widows", "Indian Women's Renaissance", "Women in National life", "Hindu's Ladies", collected in *Speeches and Writings* (Naidu, 1925).

## Life

“Why should a song-bird like you have a broken wing?”

G. K. Gokhale

Behold! I rise to meet the destined spring  
And scale the stars upon my broken wing!

(Sarojini Naidu, “The Broken Wing”, *The Broken Wing*)

In your gracious garden there is joy and fostering freedom,  
nesting place and singing space for every feathered thing,

o Master of the Birds, grant sanctuary and shelter  
also to a homing bird that brings a broken wing.

(Sarojini Naidu, “The bird sanctuary”, *The Feather of a Dawn*)



Sarojini Naidu

Sarojini Naidu: Public Domain,  
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Sarojini Naidu was born on 13 February 1879 in Hyderabad. Her family was wealthy, with a property house and a maid. Her father, Aghorenath Chattopadhyay was awarded a PhD in Chemistry at the Edinburgh University of Scotland. In 1881,

he abandoned chemistry, as he set up the Anglo Hindu Vernacular School in Hyderabad for girls. He placed great value on education, especially women's education. He supported social reforms such as women's access to education, widow's remarriage and the end of infant marriage. He lived with his family in Hyderabad, on Nampally Road, in the house, better known as "The Golden Threshold", where Sarojini Naidu was born. There he hosted intellectuals, poets, scholars, artists, aristocrats, singers, Oxford-educated professors, village priests, scientists, Muslim, Hindu and Orthodox intellectuals. On Nampally Road there was also the Nampally Girls School, set up with the aid of his wife.

Sarojini's mother, Varada Sundari Devi, was a Bengali poet. She studied at Bharat Ashram, an educational institution founded by the Indian social reformer Keshub Chunder Sen. Sweet-tempered, calm, gentle, quiet, apparently reserved, Varada Sundari composed lyrics in Bengali.

Sarojini was the first of eight children. She was educated at home by her father. From childhood, she read and wrote a lot of poetry. Sarojini left in 1895 for London and studied at King's College and at Girton Girls College at Cambridge. Sarojini often avoided the boring, too structured lessons, to enjoy the English countryside, and to write poems about nature, inspired by the landscape. She was introduced to Arthur Symons, and she met the poet Edmund Gosse and showed them some of her compositions. Edmund Gosse suggested she be a genuine Deccan poet, instead of an Anglicized one. Subsequently, in her poetry, there was a transition between European skylarks to *bulbuls*, Indian birds. Many of her poems were dedicated to her beloved Govindarajulu Naidu – a young doctor she met in India before she left for England. When she returned to India, in 1898, her parents had no more objections to the marriage between her and Mr Naidu. She had four children: two girls, Padmaja and Lilamani, and two boys, Jayasurya and Ranadhira.

In 1903, she began her affiliation with the nationalist movement during the 18th Indian National Congress Session, Bombay. On this occasion, she recited "Ode to India", and she met Gopal Krishna Gokhale, her future mentor, and Ramabai Ranade, one of the pioneers of the Indian women's emancipation movements. Soon, the nationalist cause and the need to enhance women's empowerment in India became Sarojini's main scope.

Sarojini had been encouraged by Gokhale to devote her poetry and her talent to the motherland. They shared the same ideas about the Hindu-Muslim unity issue. Gokhale introduced Sarojini to Gandhi, contributing in giving her life a special turn after that important meeting. From her first meeting, in 1914, she took the role of presenting and systematically explaining Gandhi's precepts to the public. In the same year Gokhale, Sarojini's mentor, passed away. This was a turning point for Sarojini, whose interest in social and political issues became predominant in her life, from now. She threw herself into the freedom movement after her return to India. Sarojini met Jawaharlal Nerhu. He was 10 years younger, and soon he began a younger brother to her. Her letters to Nerhu are a blend of kindness, humour, admiration. She became acquainted with all the Nerhu family, she defined "an integral part of the story of India's struggle for independence" (Naravane 2012, Location 1179).

The years 1917 and 1918 were intense for Sarojini. She took part in several meetings and delivered various speeches: in 1917 she addressed the Madras Students' Convention, with Annie Beasant as President. After the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (Amritsar massacre) perpetrated by the British army on 13 April, 1919, against an unarmed crowd – hundreds died and were injured, among them many women and children – Sarojini's political involvement changed into a staunch nationalism. She used her pen and her skilful speaking ability in speeches against the iniquity of the British rule. She writes about the "ill-treatment of women during the martial law in the Punjab" (Letter to Gandhi, 2 September 1920: 152). After this date, Sarojini's awareness of Indian women's status began to grow. In July 1919 Sarojini went to England as a Home Rule League deputation member. She spent a year here, keeping in touch with the Indian community. Sarojini gave public lectures to the English public, showing the true situation in India, and speaking against the hypocrisy of British rule. On her return, in 1920, Gandhi started the non-cooperation movement. Students, lawyers, and common people took part in the boycott movement. People abstained from buying foreign products, such as cloth. Sarojini helped Gandhi to form self-discipline among passive resisters. She explained the non-violent methods to the people by manifestos and through her speeches. By the end of the year, several people were jailed. Gandhi launched a *hartal* (strike) all over India. Sarojini took part directly in the non-violent protests, and several women, encouraged by her example, joined her.

In the 1920s Sarojini also travelled around the world. She went to Africa and took part in the Kenyan Indian Congress in 1924. She went to Mombasa, Durban, where she spoke against segregation. On her return to India, Gandhi had been released because of his illness. She presided at the Kanpur session of the Congress in 1925. On this occasion, *The New York Times* named her as the "Joan Arc of India". During her presidency, she suggested the creation of a women's section of the Congress and advocated the special need to talk about women's issues in India. In this period, she travelled in the North of India. She often met student delegations at Allahabad University, usually accompanied by Nehru's sister. In this period Muslim and Indian relations deteriorated.

The late 1920s were important for her political career, as she was appointed President of the Congress in 1925 and was Gandhi's unofficial ambassador in America. She arrived in New York in 1928. She gave lectures, poetry readings, she participated in festivals, encountered literary figures, poets, intellectuals. She admired the landscape, and people's sense of duty, love of freedom, and optimism. She met Jane Addams and admired those "splendid women who use their wealth, rank and talent in the service of fine national causes for the progress of humanity. Jane Addams" – Sarojini continues – "is of course the chief among them" (Letter to Gandhi, 19 November 1928: 214). The Grand Canyon inspired in her a sense of the sublime; she compared it to a magnificent temple built by God. She visited Elizabeth Beecher Stowe's house in Cincinnati. She met many black professors at the Howard University. She gave her solidarity to black people and visited Indian reservations.

After her return to India, she joined Congress. When Nehru was nominated as the Congress President, in 1929, complete independence had been adopted by the political party. In March of the same year, Gandhi launched the famous Dandi march

against the Salt Tax. Sarojini joined Gandhi and broke the Salt Law, reminding the *satyagrahis* to remain non-violent. When Gandhi was arrested on 5 May, she was given the leadership of the movement. She attempted to enter the Dharasana Salt Works and was arrested.

She assisted Gandhi during his fast in September 1932 and in February 1942. Sarojini had been arrested several times, the longer in Aga Khan Palace, with Gandhi and Gandhi's wife, Kasturba.

In 1931, Gandhi moved to England together with Sarojini. Here Sarojini participated in lectures and readings and met friends. She travelled to Italy and Switzerland, then visited South Africa. Sarojini had been arrested shortly after her return in India, but was soon released because of illness. In 1932 Gandhi started a fast in protest of the announcement of separated electorates of untouchables by their leader, Dr. Ambedkar. Then he founded the journal *Harjjan* and travelled on foot during 1933-34. Sarojini often accompanied him in these struggles.

In 1942 the Congress adopted the Quit India resolution, asking the British to leave India. Thousands were arrested. Sarojini was imprisoned, too. In gaol she had an encouraging influence on other prisoners. When Mahadev Desai and Kasturba Gandhi passed away in prison, she felt great sadness.

In 1944 Gandhi was released. He helpfully tried to resolve unity by meeting Jinnah several times. But, finally, on 15 August 1947, the British transferred power to two independent states: India and Pakistan. The partition was a dramatic event, with riots, mass-migrations of refugees, rapes and violence between the two communities. On 30 January 1948, Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu-nationalist, at a prayer meeting in Delhi. Sarojini continued to remain the same, important column of the Congress in those dramatic days. Though the assassination of Gandhi left a deep sorrow in Sarojini, she demonstrated self-control. In her speech at Gandhi's funeral, she talked about him as "a lineal descendant of all the great teachers who taught the gospels of truth, love, and peace" (Naravane 2012: Location 1169).

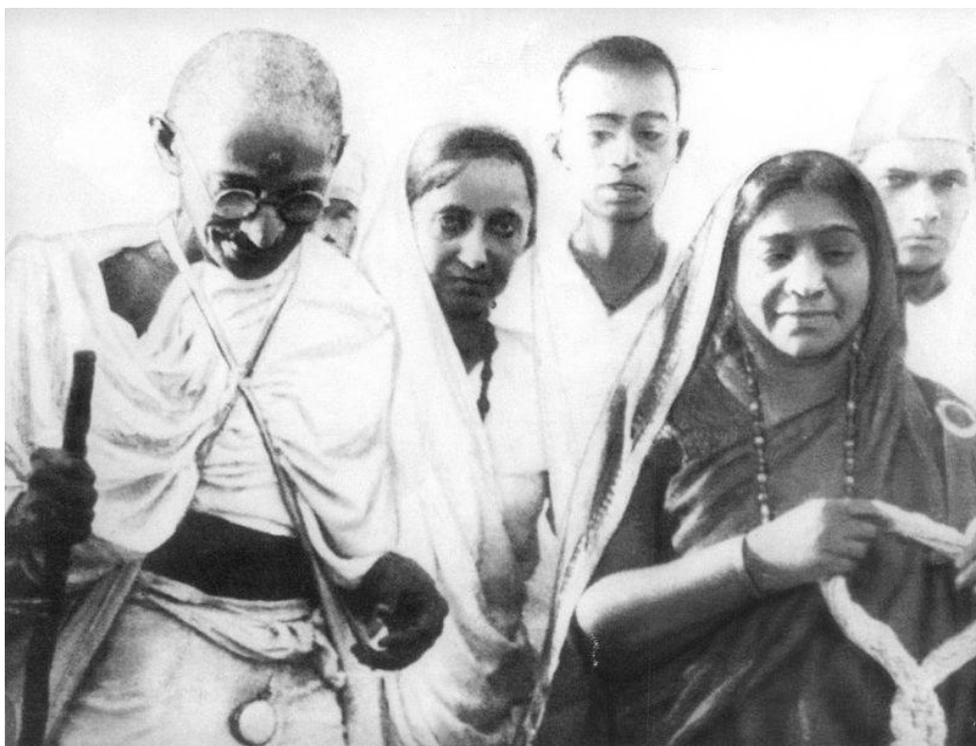
Sarojini was nominated governor of Uttar Pradesh by Nehru. In these final years she showed herself to be a brilliant legislator; she met students in conferences and celebrations in many universities, and never stopped being a woman of spirit, infusing positive energy to the people around her.

In the late winter of 1949 she felt ill. She passed away on 2 March, 1949. Sixty thousand people watched the ultimate departure of Sarojini Naidu in silent grief, at her funeral on the Gomti river banks.

### **Political Writings on Women**

Sarojini Naidu was influenced by her father's thought about women's upliftment: like Aghorenath Chattopadhyay, she was in favour of women's education, the ending of child marriage, and widows' remarriage. However, she became a spokesperson for women issues after her meeting with remarkable women who worked for women's empowerment, like Annie Beasant, who headed the Theosophical Society and supported the Indian National Congress, and Ramabai Ranade, who founded

Seva Sadan, an association for the service of women. Besides, Sarojini was introduced to other important political women and men by Gokhale.



Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu during the Salt Satyagraha, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/Mahatma %26 Sarojini Naidu 1930.JPG](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/Mahatma_%26_Sarojini_Naidu_1930.JPG)

In 1917 she set up the Women's Indian Association, with Annie Besant, Dorothy Graham Jinarajadassa, whose main aim was to obtain women's right to vote. With the Government of India Act (1919) women's right to vote was denied. This led to widespread protests, and Sarojini inquired why the British did not extend the franchise to women. Paradoxically, the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms stated that this resolution wanted to protect the rights of a minority of women secluded in *purdanashin* – i.e. secluded women – not to provoke religious men. As Geraldine Forbes writes, “excluding females from the India Act seemed to be de facto recognition of male authority over women” (Forbes 2004: 100).

Sarojini set her battle against indentured labour – known as *Girmitya* in Hindi – for an intense period. Sarojini was aware of women's exploitation through this practice, since they were uprooted from their homes, transported from India to Fiji to work on the sugarcane plantations. Many women escaped from dowry, poverty, and oppressive situations, to encounter miserable conditions. Sarojini travelled to Kenya, South Africa, Southern Rhodesia, where she spread her message against indentured labour. She condemned it and especially condemned the ill-practice of

exploitation of poor women. British Guiana abolished indentured labour firstly, and Fiji only in 1920. She had been affiliated with the International Women's Congress.

In 1925 Sarojini became the first Indian woman to serve as the President of the Indian National Congress. This was a great and symbolic achievement. The next year the women's movement gained its first success: women could be appointed members of legislatures by nomination. In the same year she became associated with the All India Women's Conference (AIWC). This organisation was originally conceived for an educational scope; subsequently, along with Sarojini presidency, also political issues were considered by AIWC. Margaret Cousins headed the AIWC initiatives and contributed to the foundation of women's movement in India. Margaret, together with her husband James, joined the Beasant's Theosophical Society in 1915, from their arrival in India. Margaret Cousin and Annie Beasant wanted to give an organisation to women's activities. Sarojini bridged between the activity of AIWC and the National Congress. She also worked for the solidarity among women all over the world.

Sarojini took part in the Pan Pacific women's conference at Honolulu in 1927. She worked for the National Council for Women in India and the International Council for Women. In 1932 she was at the Round Table Conference in London as representative of Indian women. The Women's Manifesto published in 1936 by the Women's Indian Association was inspired by Sarojini. She was in touch with several Western women affiliated to the suffragist movements and the feminist debate, as Christal MacMillan, "a very handsome old lady famous in the women's movement (Letter to Padmaja and Leilamani, 1 December 1931: 266).

Sarojini addressed the Patna Session of the Women's conference, where the campaign against *purdah* was debated. Gandhi inaugurated the campaign and invited women to abandon the veil. Even though Sarojini's poetry was criticised for exalting the segregated life of the royal family's women, Sarojini crusaded against this custom. She also campaigned for the right to divorce.

During her trip to the United States, she held several talks about women's status in India: in her lectures, entitled *The Veiled Pageant*, *Guardians of the Flame*, *A Garden Enclosed*, *The Sceptre of Service*, she gave another image of India, very different from the discrediting one the journalist Catherine Mayo gave with her recently published *Mother India*. Sarojini wrote to Gandhi: "I shall be a good ambassador. I go not to refute the falsehoods of an ignorant woman but to interpret the Soul of India" (7 August 1928: 204). Sarojini was aware that the colonial rule used the excuse of "Indian cultural social customs" to legitimate British "civilizing mission". In a letter to her daughter Leilamani she writes: "[The Western world] believes that Indian women are – and always were – downtrodden, ignorant, and weak" (3 October 1925: 179). In order to deny this belief, she gave a counter-narrative of Indian women's status: she showed the important role played by women in India's history, art and culture, up until the freedom movement. Her speech during the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress, in 1917, compares women to torchbearers of the freedom fighter. In her words: "the success of the whole movement lies centred in what is now known as the woman question. It is not you but we who are the true nation builders" (Kumar 2014: Location 228). Sarojini's words and deeds contributed the special role of women in the national struggle to

emerge. In her letter to Padmaja and Leilamani she describes, in vibrant prose, these masses of satyagrahi women involved in the struggle, then imprisoned.

There are 120 of the Satyagrahi and pseudo-Satyagrahi Legion of “Bens”<sup>1</sup> from Gujarat. They fill 2 long barracks near my cottage and overflow into six crowded tents on the open space that was dedicated to my walk, morning and evening. They are a loud army of protestants and protest against everything at the top of their voice, interspersed with shrill interecine altercations and punctuated at dawn and dusk with a serried medley of prayer and praise [...] It is rather heroic and impressive to see these Gujarati ladies... most of them form homes of comfort and culture, most of them delicately nurtured, sheltered and cherished, enduring more or less long tenures of rigorous imprisonment... [...] Some of them, too, are in acutely feminine phases and stages of life... Going to have, on the verge of having, or having just had little Gujarati babies. (2 May 1932: 270).

Sarojini’s oratory was vibrant and brilliant, she fascinated the audience, and spoke extempore, her “words drop from her lips like full-blown flowers” (Paranjape 2012: 65). On several occasions, she engendered her discourse and spoke about and for women’s empowerment. During her presidential address to the 1925 Congress session, she spoke about a “restoration” of women’s role in the society as in the classical Indian period. In her view, freedom would be reached only with equality for women. She considered her appointment as Congress President as a “generous tribute to Indian womanhood and [...] loyal recognition of its legitimate place in the secular and spiritual counsels of the nation” (Paranjape 2012: 266. Setting her speech in the restoration of women’s role vulgate, she asserts: “You have only reverted to an old tradition and restored to Indian woman the classic position she once held in her happier epoch of our country’s story [...]. I might bring some glowing ember of the immortal faith that illumined the vigil of Sita in her forest exile” (Paranjape 2012: 266-8). Sita is a *Ramayana* female character, married to Rama, Vishnu’s incarnation. Avatar of Lakshimi, the goddess of prosperity, Sita is revered among Hindus, as she embodies the ideal woman’s virtues: loyalty and self-sacrifice. By using these words, Sarojini seems to accept the traditional role given to women in society. Giving a traditional, and thus conservative, image of women’s role in Indian society, Sarojini was strongly criticised of romanticism and idealization, and of not considering the dark side of women’s status in ancient India. However, Sarojini tries to interpret the *Ramayana* heroine in a feminist perspective. Often considered a victim because of her choice to renounce life to escape an unjust world and re-join her mother the Earth (see Sally J. Sutherland 1989: 63-79), Sita demonstrates also strength and courage, wisdom and willpower. Following Sarojini’s path, interpretations of Sita in a feminist perspective recently come to light (see Namita Gokhale 2009 and Premalatha 2017).

In her speech, Sarojini continues talking about her “domestic programme”, which consists in the restoration of India’s “true position as the supreme mistress in her own house, the sole guardian of her own vast resources, and the sole dispenser of her own hospitality” (Naravane 2012: Location 1595). This passage is meaningful, as it shows her attempt to be revolutionary and feminine at the same time, that is fighting for women’s freedom and respect for women, without renouncing the traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Sisters.

division of roles of man and woman in human life. According to Naravane (2012), she was influenced by Gandhi's and Tagore's vision of women. In fact, as Nair (2008) observes, the Gandhian movement gave a partial victory to women's emancipation, for how nationalism was reconfigured, through the representations of the Indian nation as feminine, and the large-scale and unprecedented participation of women in the national movement. Sarojini tries to find another path – different from Western feminism, for Indian women, in order to construct an enlightened society for a free India, where men and women work together for a better future. She avoided following Western feminism because she saw the risk of a division of society – a risk that would damage the Indian nation's struggle for independence, since it would divide men and women. This is why Sarojini often looked at Western feminism with a critical eye and tried to build an ideology that would guarantee the union of Indian society against the common enemy: the Western world. At the same time, this ideology had to be respectful of tradition, in order to find the favour of the different strata of India. A balance that was difficult to achieve.

In one of her letters, her awareness of Western feminism's narrowness is evident, when she perspicuously affirms

The women of Europe for all their intelligence and education remain merely mental and limited – imitating men in a fierce, resentful, revengeful kind of way... poor, foolish things, instead of recognizing the strength and sanctity of their womanhood as the inspiring and purifying influence in the world... (Letter to Jaisoorya Naidu, 16 June 1920: 146).

The limits of the so-called “enlightened” Western behaviour towards women is stressed in another letter:

Today the great debate on the India question takes place in the House of Commons, but I could not go for a very amusing reason. All the R.T. delegates were to get seats in the special gallery but so hidebound and stupid are old English customs that women are not allowed to sit in that special gallery. So, I had to return my ticket. I was both annoyed and diverted by such an exhibition of British conservatism (Letter to Padmaja Naidu, 3 December 1931: 267).

In a letter to Leilamani she considers the different framework in which Indian women's awareness moves, unlike that of Western women:

Only remember – she writes – that you are an Indian girl and that puts upon you a heavier burden than if you were an English girl born to a heritage of freedom. Remember that you have to help India to be free and the children of tomorrow to be free-born citizens of a free land and therefore – if you are true to your country's need you must recognize the responsibility of your Indian womanhood. Nothing in your speech or action should cause the progress of Indian women to suffer, nothing in yourself should give room for wretched reactionary slave-minds to say “This comes of giving too much education and freedom to our women”. Think over it my darling. You are not free” (Letter to Leilamani Naidu, 4 March 1921: 156-157).

Thus, Indian women are twice (or more) subaltern, at least once more subaltern than western women, because Indian women, differently from Western ones, are colonized. For this reason, Sarojini conceived women's empowerment together with the battle for freedom, which must be conducted by both women and men. She linked political and economic issues to the women's condition and extended the battle for women's upliftment from social to political and economic issues. She says: “The question is whether in the reconstruction of the national life it will be possible for

you to have a rich national life unless and until it is shared and supported by women who are the soul of citizenship and the life of the nation?" (Paranjape 2012: 238).

Sarojini sets her discourse in the "golden age" narrative, when women were valued and had positions of high status, considering the present situation as a regression. This representation of an idealized past, and a dark present, was common to many activists for women's rights in 20<sup>th</sup>-century India; even though it problematized the historical woman's question in India, it helped to legitimate social reform.

Interestingly, in her reply to the Secretary of State for India Edwin Montagu on Punjabi women mistreating by British rule, she seems to defend the custom of *pardah*, as she writes "pardah is as sacred to the Indian women as is her veil to the Catholic Nun and forcibly unveil an Indian woman constitutes in itself a gross outrage" (Manmohan Kaur 1968: 258-9). In her discourse on women's franchise, she writes on the same issue "without discussing the merits or demerits of this old social custom, I am convinced that, like other all time-honoured but already obsolete social observances and usages, the *pardah* system can no longer remain immutable, but must read just itself to the needs and demands of a widespread national re-awakening" (Paranjape 2012: 245).

In "Women's Education and the Unity of India" she states:

The subject of women's education in India cannot be fully considered except in its relation to the vexed and delicate problem of the *pardah*. To be or not to be, that is the question! There are many ardent but not far-seeing social reformers who loudly advocate the immediate and wholesale abolition of the *pardah* as an initial step towards education. I suppose it is not easy for those whose lives are cast in progressive places where the *pardah* system is so elastic, to realise that to countless men and women in other parts of India it is dearer than life itself and synonymous with their honour. All my life I have lived in a Mohamedan country which is regarded as the stronghold of the *pardah*, and I realise what a calamity of incalculably tragic results would follow a premature and total abolition of the system [...]. Indeed I hold that the crowning triumph of education will be the complete emancipation of Indian womanhood. In the fulness of time, like a splendid and full-blown flower, she will emerge from the protecting sheath of her *pardah* (Paranjape 2012: 209).

Sarojini sees the real revolution as a gradual, step by step achievement of women's freedom from their direct actions toward a grass-root level change. A radical, up-to-down change is not durable, nor is a real women's liberation, as it is an oppressive solution wanted by illuminated and westernized social reformers, who Sarojini successfully defines "not far-seeing". For a long-lasting result, she advocates women's education. An educated woman will be able to defeat all obsolete customs which seclude her, as *pardah*.

Continuity with traditions, instead of rupture, is one of Sarojini's standpoints in her discourse for women's franchise. She does not question women's and men's roles. With her words: "It has been said that to give women franchise would be to rid them of feminine grace [...]. We realise that men and women have separate goals and separate destinies and that just as a man can never fulfil the responsibility of a woman, a woman cannot fulfil the responsibility of man" (Paranjape 2012: 240-241). Seeming not to discuss patriarchal power, Sarojini's assertions need to be considered under a post-colonial perspective. In her effort, Sarojini Naidu tried to defend her cultural and gendered identity from the double colonization Indian women had to

face, as colonial subjects, and as oppressed women. To Catherine Mayo's Mother India, and the general British "civilizing mission" narrative, Sarojini opposed her counter narrative of the traditional enlightened role of Indian women, postulating the necessary recognition of women franchise. To find a different path from Western feminism, Sarojini enforced her arguments by quoting women's role in political battles, and ultimately in the struggle for India's independence among Gandhi's movement.

She [The Indian woman] has been pre-eminently associated with the political life of the country, uplifting the voice of her indignation against all measures of unjust and oppressive legislation [...], she has accorded her cordial support to all beneficent, social and economic measure, like Gokhale's Bill for free and compulsory education, the Civil Marriage Bill of Mr Basu, the Inter-Caste Marriage Bill of Mr Patel and the Swadeshi movement inaugurated by my friend and leader, Mahatma Gandhi, and all efforts to ameliorate the condition of the depressed and afflicted members of our society (Paranjape 2012: 244).

We have to remember also that she did not consider herself a feminist in a westernized meaning. Nevertheless, Sarojini's contribution to the Indian Women's movement was meaningful and very important, as she gave a different perspective in considering women's upliftment from various aspects: economic security, political rights, the right to divorce, *purdah*, the role of women in India's cultural progress, and women's struggle for the national cause. She helped the Indian women's movement to grow, avoiding the imitation of the western women's movement without any critical approach. She was aware that Indian women must look back to their heritage to find a solution and the inspiration for their social, and political struggles. She was convinced that only by looking back at the ancient role of women in society the modern India's society could give to women their right status. Sarojini had never been a traditional woman: undoubtedly, in her private and public life she was a living example of an emancipated woman.

### **Dreams of a Poetess**

Sarojini Naidu experienced poetry from a very young age: she published her main poetry volumes in the early phase of her life: *The Golden Threshold*, in 1905, and *The Bird of Time: Songs of Life, Death and the Spring*, in 1912. Both were printed in London with the support of Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symons, two English poets affiliated to the romantic revival in England. In 1917 she published her last book of poetry in life, *The Broken Wing: Songs of Love, Death and the Spring*. The other collections, *The Sceptred Flute: Songs of India* (1943), *The Feather of the Dawn* (1961), and *The Indian Wavers* (1971), were posthumously published. Even if the love for poetry never faded during her political activity, it is clear that the editing of new books of poetry had been subordinated to the nationalist cause.

Since her baptism as a poet was blessed by the members of the Rhymers' Club in London ("William Watson, [...] Davidson, [...] Thompson [...], Yeats with his exquisite dreams and music, Norman Gale, [...] Arthur Symons, the marvellous boy, with his passionate nature and fiery eyes, all gathered together in the friendly house of that dearest and lovingest of friends and rarest and most gifted of geniuses, Edmund Gosse", *Letter to M. Govindarajulu Naidu*, London, 13 January 1896),

Sarojini was deeply influenced by the so-called “new poets”, with mixed “melancholic sensuality, [...] and attention to the intricacies of rhyme and rhythm” of the “new poets” (Anna Snaith 2014: 74).

According to Paranjape this was a “colonial relationship” (p. xxv), in which Sarojini, a young Indian woman, had been subjugated by the fascinating prestige of the “godfather of [her] dreaming girlhood” (p. 62) and the adoring envy mixed to the admiration for her friend Symons (“I envy you very much, very much – but that envy is swallowed up completely by a greater and a truer feeling of admiration, and it is with very great pride I count myself among the friends of so gifted a poet”, Letter to Arthur Symons, 10 July 1896: 23). This complex relationship, not wholly equal, is – according to Paranjape – reflected in her poetry, since it has been deeply influenced by Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symons. Nevertheless, Sarojini could not be blamed for this “weakness”, since she was very young (16 years old), and plainly aware of the improbable opportunities her loved city, Hyderabad, could offer to a young poetess to emerge. In her words: “I wonder if you can realize how difficult it is for any one to keep ‘merely’ to the ‘primrose path’ of Art – in India [...] living in Hyderabad the most self-centred of all Indian principalities, absolutely isolated from all living literary influences and public, my personal ambition for success, for fame has been growing less and less” (*Letter to E. Gosse*, 12th January 1905). Her first London experience in the 1890s was to prove her value as a poet – and her dream to become a poet had been fulfilled: “Poetry is the one thing I love so passionately, so intensely, so absolutely, that is my very life of life – and now you have told me that I am a poet – I am a poet! I keep repeating it to myself to try to realize it” (Letter to E. Gosse, 1896: 27). The success of Sarojini’s talent depended on E. Gosse’s decision to publish or not: and this liaison is accepted by Sarojini, who never takes a step without Gosse’s permission – as her need for his approval we can find in her letters: “Of course, I should not dream of saying yes without consulting you” (To E. Gosse, Hyderabad 5 May 1904); “I sent [to Gosse] the poems last week and this week I am writing to him to communicate directly with you and give his formal sanction to publishing this book [*The Bird of Time*]. Mr Gosse is my literary godfather, so I must, in common loyalty ask his sanction before giving a book to the world even under your sheltering wing” (Letter to W. Heinemann, Hyderabad 20 July 1911). And Gosse’s introduction to *The Bird of Time* is necessary to understand how his influence had determined the aesthetics of Sarojini’s poetry. He writes:

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. They were Western in feeling and in imagery; [...] I advised the consignment of all that she had written, in this falsely English vein, to the waste-paper basket. I implored her to consider that from a young Indian of extreme sensibility, who had mastered not merely the language but the prosody of the West, what we wished to receive was [...] some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East long before the West had begun to dream that it had a soul. Moreover, I entreated Sarojini to write no more about robins and skylarks, in a landscape of our Midland counties, with the village bells somewhere in the distance calling the parishioners to church, but to describe the flowers, the fruits, the trees, 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. (E. Gosse, Introduction to *The Bird of Time*).

As a result, – according to Paranjape (2012) – Sarojini’s poetry is imprisoned in the mimics of her Western literary patron (Edmund Gosse), and the “new poets” models (Arthur Symons, Yeats): her transition from a “machine-made imitator of the English classics” to “a genuine Indian poet of the Deccan” under Gosse’s advice, makes her poems artificial, inauthentic, performing an image of India which best suits the artistic taste of the English public, but betrays her coherence with her struggle for Indian women’s enhancement.

Conflicts within Sarojini’s poetry can be analysed in a post-colonial perspective. Since she was a spectator of the cultural colonization of the Indian world by Western modernity and rationality, Sarojini is a subaltern, in the extent of what G. C. Spivak has conceptualized in her article “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. In Spivak’s words, “in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female, is even more deeply in shadow” (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1988: 271). Unlike many women who could really not speak, Sarojini conceived subaltern in a colonial perspective, was able to enhance her voice against women’s seclusion. However, she was not wholly free from that linguistic phenomenon Franz Fanon defines in his book, *Black Skins, White Masks*,

It is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other. [...] To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization. [...] Mastery of language affords remarkable power. [...] Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle [...] (Fanon 1970: 48).

In this perspective, Sarojini is subaltern, since she writes poetry in the colonizer’s language, and, first of all, for the colonizer’s public. Her debut was blessed by English poets, like Edmund Gosse, who constricted Sarojini to fulfil the wishes of the post-Industrial West for the “postcolonial exotic” (Graham Huggan 2001), a mysterious soul of India, which was merely a projection the West expected to see. With the result that “her India is more artificial, exotic, and picturesque than any account by an Anglo-Indian poet” (Paranjape 2012: 45), though less “dishonest” than Anglo-Indian poets’ representations, since her knowledge of India was better than any foreign Orientalist could have. In Paranjape’s words,

Sarojini subtly but certainly complicated the apparently simple relationship of the colonised and the coloniser that was contained in Gosse’s advice to her. Though ostensibly colluding with dominant metropolitan aesthetic and producing and answerable portrayal of India to suit Western tastes, she also resisted such a project by both nativizing and politicising it. She thus reclaimed her right to represent herself as an India and also brought into poetic discourse the marginalised and oppressed ‘folk’ [giving] them dignity, even grandeur, even if this meant masking their wretchedness and exploitation (Paranjape 2012: 45-46).

Sarojini was a sensitive spectator of the cultural colonization of her world by Western modernity and rationality. Indian culture and traditions were menaced by this new dominant world. In this context, the counter reaction was the revival of Indian religion and spirituality, called “Indian renaissance”, and whose main interpreter was Gandhi. He offered an alternative to colonialism and modernity.

Thus, Sarojini's poetry tried to reproduce an authentic world diverse from colonial modernity. Her concern about its disappearance is expressed in a letter to her editor:

These beautiful and symbolic and uplifting things [she refers to the Hindu feasts of serpents] are dying out of our daily life, alas: but in my own home [...] they are observed and faithfully fulfilled – Your Western civilization has not been an unmixed blessing to us at all, to us of this generation; but me, the dreamer, the child of a thousand mysteries [...] it has not been able to rob of my spiritual and poetic heritage" (*Letter to W. Heinemann*, Hyderabad 27 July 1911: 58).

The new [Nizam] is a dear boy, but he belongs to the Modern Age... and where we had elephant processions we shall have motors, where we had torches to light the streets, we shall have Kitson lights, where we had the glamour and splendour and glory of the Arabian Nights we shall have "improvements", better sanitation, more ordered system of administration [...] Those marvellous days are gone" (*Letter to W. Heinemann*, Hyderabad 7 September 1911: 65).

In this poetic world, suspended in a pre-modern age, colourful and vivid, spoiled by the squalor and suffering of poverty, not only are the women segregated, but the whole of India is set apart, in a sort of extended *purdah*, from the contradictory reality of immense poverty and Western modernity Sarojini experienced as a woman of her time. We can say that Sarojini put her pre-modern Indian world in the *zenana*. It is a "poetic ethnography", as successfully defined by Paranjape, "a way of preserving through writing what was passing away before her eyes. All these factors contributed to her attempt at offering not just to Westerners, but also to Indians, a picture of themselves which they might be proud of, something that might salvage some of their crippled self-respect as a colonized and humiliated people" (Paranjape 2012: 50).

Many of her poems collected in the volumes between 1905 to 1917 depict women in a romantic and exotic way. Her poetry shows women suffering for their beloved death, fragile and imprisoned, with no chance for a better life, nor a desire to escape from the patriarchal status quo which apparently Sarojini glorifies and does not discuss.

In the poem "Suttee" (*sati*), in *The Golden Threshold*, Sarojini admires the Rajiput women who did *jauhar* in ancient time. *Jauhar* was a medieval practice of collective suicide of women in case the city was invaded by the enemy, in defence of chastity and devotion to their husbands. In "Suttee" the wife's sorrow for her husband's death ends with the words "Shall the flesh survive when the soul is gone?", which implicitly but clearly – as Paranjape (2012) observes – recalls women's self-sacrifice on the husband's pyre in *sati* practice. However, according to Naravane (2012) the annihilation of the widow is only metaphorical. Other poems were dedicated to widowhood, such as "Dirge. In sorrow for her bereavement" and "Vasant Panchami", both collected in *The Bird of Time*. In these poems women appear imprisoned in their status of eternal sorrow and grief. The widow could not take part in the spring festival of Vasant Panchami, because her mourning is eternal. There is no chance for a better life, no exit from the traditional remarriage ban. For Paranjape, Sarojini "appears to romanticise sati [...], implying that like several other retrogressive practices from her immediate past, she found it aesthetically appealing though as a champion of women's rights, she opposed it politically. This tension between her poetry and her politics is evident throughout her work" (Paranjape 2012: 21). "Certainly – he continues – the champion of women's rights can be seen

politically at her worst here. Poems such as these suggest that she never quite broke with tradition in her way of thinking” (Paranjape 2012: 26).

In her early creative process, there is apparently no room for any political debate: moreover, in her early career as a poet, she deliberately refuses any utility of her poetry, and does not want to write poems to be of any utility of her country, neither for women – in a way condemning what her father had done in his political struggles for women’s upliftment:

France they say is the land of movements, but Modern India I think their ‘cradle and home and their bier’. There is a tacit understanding that all talents and enthusiasms should concentrate themselves on some practical end for the immediate and obvious good of the nation. There are innumerable strong foes who would lure you or force you into their own special task. The leader of a “religious reform”, the prophet of “social progress”, the editor of a political journal, the worker in the cause of “female education”, the president of a “Home for Hindu Widows”, the advocate for the revival of home industries, a whole paradox of admirable and incongruous movements to be pressed on me – to me of all people, with scarcely enough bodily strength to exist at times – and a part so unfitted to do more than sing with the birds in the forest of lilies and nut palms!” (*Letter to E. Gosse*, Hyderabad 4th September 1905, p. 46).

However, using this assumption to understand her whole production – in poetry and prose – risks giving a partial imagine of Sarojini’s thought: in fact this assumption was written early before her active involvement into the nationalistic struggle, and behind her words we can, to some extent, read the burden of what was expected from her, who was to become “a national poet” (*Letter to E. Gosse*, Hyderabad 12 January 1905: 45).

However, as a first conclusion of the present debate, Sarojini’s poetry apparently remains outside her political activity: “Her lyric poetry becomes an indulgence, or an embarrassment, in the context of her career as a politician and orator. Her poetry, seen as sentimental, derivative and backward-looking, sits awkwardly alongside her feminist anti-colonialism” (Snaith 2014: 69).

On the contrary, according to Anna Snaith, Sarojini Naidu’s poetry was not a mere expression of private pain, but a first experiment of translating the private into the public sphere, therefore linked to her subsequent political experience. In other words, Anna Snaith does not see any discontinuity between Sarojini’s poetry and prose, but a continuum. The four periods she spent in London (the first from 1895 to 1899, the second from 1912 to 1914, the third from 1919 to 1921, and the last in 1931), were marked with a growing nationalist – and feminist – awareness, which was shaped early during her frequentations with the Irish nationalist poets, such as Yeats and Symons, and definitely gained its final contours after the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre. This interpretation revolutionizes the reading of Sarojini’s poetry and politics and complicates the question about her position as a poetess and a politician, apparently contradictory. Anna Snaith affirms that the members of the Rhymers’ Club had “influenced her later feminist nationalism” (Snaith 2014: 70), with a “cross-cultural nationalism” especially inspired by Yeats’ Irish revivalism. In fact, Yeats’ interest in Irish folk tales and folk songs is reflected by Sarojini’s poems about Indian folks: they both romanticize a pre-modern life, seen as a remedy to the British colonizer’s modernity.

Giving a glance to other poems on women’s status, as “Pardah Nashin” and “Nightfall in the City of Hyderabad”, which describe the segregated life of women

in a splendid jail, we can discover a deep meaning behind the first superficial interpretation that has often been given. In this couplet, excerpted from the poem “Nightfall in the City of Hyderabad”, she describes the women looking out from the *zenana*’s balcony:

From trellised balconies, languid and luminous  
Faces gleam, veiled in a splendour voluminous.

The words Sarojini uses to depict the richness and the splendour that contour the woman may lead to consider Sarojini in favour of *pardah*. However, in the end of the poem, Sarojini goes deep inside the feelings of the woman segregated: feelings of sorrow and sadness. We can interpret the subject of the poem as a “double prison”: the *pardah*, in which the woman is constricted, and the silent sorrow imprisoned in the heart of the segregated woman. Thus, instead of being a poem in favour of *pardah*, it shows its futility. In “Purdah Nashin”, from *The Golden Threshold* we read:

But thought no hand  
Unsanctioned dares  
Unveil the mysteries of her grace,  
Time lifts the curtain unawares,  
And sorrow looks into her face...

The same introspection is given by another poem taken from *The Golden Threshold*, “The Princess Zeb-un-Nissa”, whose protagonist is isolated from the world. Queen Gulnar has everything in her room, but is unsatisfied, she is bored. In these poems the women are depicted as being bored, in solitude and sorrow, although their cages appear splendid and opulent.

Even though Sarojini does not openly discuss the seclusion of women in her poetry, she writes about women, from a woman’s perspective, opening the private space of the *zenana* to the public. Her subjectivity through her poems emerges as a factor of agency. Interestingly, they are the result of a hybrid culture. As Snaith observes: “Naidu campaigned actively against both *pardah* [...] and *sati* [...], and while these poems are certainly not radically feminist, they recognize the voice and motivation of women in these contexts. Poems such as these are not derivative, neither purely European nor Indian, but the product of [an] hybrid situation” (2014: 79).

With her poetry, as in her political speeches and writings, she symbolizes the feminization of the public sphere: her gendered politics, which can be easily interpreted in her prose, implicitly lies in the values she celebrates in her poetry: devotion, altruism, fortitude, embodied by the heroines of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the Indian epics: Sita, Savitri, Damayanti, we can find also in her political speeches, or common women.

Thus, Sarojini does not unconsciously adhere to Gosse’s advice, but she is aware of her role of interpreter of a “cross-cultural poetics”. In Sarojini’s poems about *sati* and *pardah* we should read “her desire to interpret India to Britain and vice versa”, and this is poignantly clear in her letters to her editor. In her words:

To you in your wholly different mental and spiritual atmosphere how remote and how remote  
and unreal such things must seem, especially in one who as a girl talked and walked with

English poets and watched the English daisies in blossom and heard the skylark sing from English greens – but, perhaps it is the skylark after all who makes the link between the East and the West, Shelley’s Skylark in all its inscrutable yearning, passionate ecstasy to reach and be merged in the Infinite beauty and music and splendour, which we Hindus are always striving towards from birth. So, after all – knowing the rapture and the yearning of your English Skylark, an eastern woman’s soul may not perhaps seem to you so remote, so unusual (*Letter to William Heinemann*, Hyderabad, 27 July 1911: 59).

Beauty is my supreme God! I have in me something of the Greek hunger for material loveliness combined – no, infused – with the immemorial Hindu thirst for the immaterial mystic and spiritual glamour of the invisible “Om”, a fusion that does not always make for peace in one’s life – but certainly the conflict between the two gives ecstasy (*Letter to William Heinemann*, Hyderabad, 28 March 1912: 74).

According to Anna Snaith, Sarojini poetry must not be read only in a British context, as a comeback to a Western public, but a “key feature of her emergent feminist nationalism (or a response to the contemporary political situation), which would be articulated in numerous speeches from the early twentieth century onwards. Her poetry, then, is constitutive of her later politics, rather than a distraction from or even a catalyst for it” (Snaith 2012: 72).

This theory is confirmed by Sarojini’s same words, which demonstrate her dream of being someone important for her country is read in her early letters to Symons, while she was returning to India:

I know, I am sure, that if there be any real gift in me, any genius, it must catch strange, bright fires from the inspiration of so much beauty and the mystery of the dead, great sorrowful Past... and if, as you say, there is a possibility of my achieving any real greatness in Art or life, it can become certainty only in India: but I have a terrible fear that I have not the strength of soul to accomplish anything alone, and against such odds – I have a terrible fear lest I be overcome by the circumstances, of tradition, of everything, and yet crushed into a mediocrity – I could not tolerate that” (*Letter to Arthur Symons*, Pembridge Crescent, 17 August 1898: 36-37)

Her acclamation as a national symbol to her country is referred in her letter to Gosse: “It was a great awakening for me [...] My public was waiting for me – no, not for me, so much as for a poet, a national poet [...]. I shall indeed produce something worthy to be offered to my nation as a gift” (*Letter to E. Gosse*, Hyderabad 12 January 1905).

Her devotion to the nationalist cause and women’s issues – as indentured labour, women’s franchise, women’s education – in the next years till the end of her life, is the result of a whole-existence development, which emerged in her early experience and grew into a mature political awareness.

## Conclusion

How can it be, that the subject, taken to be the condition for, and instrument of agency, is at the same time the effect of subordination, understood as deprivation of agency?

(Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*: 10)

In the Indian women’s movement, Sarojini Naidu was not a beginner, as was Margaret Cousins nor a radical activist like Pandita Ramabai, nor a staunch feminist, as she often declared in her various conferences. She was a controversial figure in

feminist studies also for her poetry, ambiguously exalting social injustices, like *sati* and *pardah*, and the patriarchal status quo of a feudal society in which women are subjugated by men. However, it is interesting to compare her controversial poetry to her life experience, which are dissonant. She was an emancipated woman: Sarojini, member of a Brahmin family, had an inter-caste marriage with a doctor; she was educated abroad, in England. She travelled a lot, giving lectures and public speeches about poetry and politics. She led civil disobedience while Gandhi was in prison, she actively took part in marches, parades, public speeches and the *satyagraha* movement. She was appointed President of the Indian National Congress and President of the All-India Women Conference. She was Governor of Uttar Pradesh. She fought for women's education, women's franchise, and women's advancement in society. She wanted to find a different path from Western-style feminism for Indian women. She did not want conflict between the sexes, but mutual cooperation for a common cause.

Sarojini's poetry has "inner tensions and conflicts", and "reproduces the contradictions and debates of her age" (Paranjape 2012: 38). Many of her poems, like "Suttee" or "Dirge", seem to be the celebration of women's oppression, while other poems, like "Purdah Nashin", give a multifaceted and more complex insight to women's status. However, Sarojini's poetry is remarkable for giving voice to women's feelings, and insights from a different point of view: and this poetic aim is capably succeeded by the fact that the author who imagines and writes is a woman. Often criticized for being feminine, and not feminist, in her poetry, Sarojini has the merit to give voice to subalterns. Certainly, we should not reduce Sarojini's political thought to her poetry, nor limit the poetic analysis to her verses, without considering her speeches and political writings (Paranjape 2012).

The aim of Sarojini's poems is not to analyse or confront the real world, but to give a pleasant escape from reality. Surprisingly, her best poems are those which represent a feudal world, while the more prosaic poems are those which are imbued with nationalistic subjects. Different assessment may be made of her prose. Gandhi gave her the title of "Bharat Kokila", the "Nightingale of India", probably because of her speeches, and not for her verses. As Paranjape writes, "Her prose is [...] more poetic than some of her nationalistic poetry, which is prosaic" (2012: 66). However, as Snaith observes, there is not a sharp discontinuity between her poetry and her political writings. The apparent division between the woman and her poetry, is the result of a westernized point of view and interpretation. On the contrary, we can interpret her poetry as a forge where she moulded her political-nationalistic and feminist thought – using "feminist" in the same extent Geraldine Forbes uses it, in an "inclusive definition" (see Forbes 2004: 8).

According to Hasi Banjeriee (1998) Sarojini Naidu conceived the role of women within a traditional vision, so there was no need to consider the women's rights movement in India apart from India's liberation movement. As Banjeriee observes, for Sarojini – but also for Gandhi – women's struggle for women's rights would have weakened and divided India in its fight for Indian independence. Therefore, if for Naidu Indian independence had to contemplate equal rights and struggle for the emancipation of both sexes, on the practical side the female question remained subordinate to the urgency of a free nation. The idea of Banjeriee is confirmed in

Ghadai's thesis (2014) which sees in the political oratory of Sarojini a feminist scheme and, at the same time, the search for a different path from Western feminism.

According to Paranjape, Sarojini's poetry must be evaluated separately from the political discourse, as often the best poems come into disagreement with the author's political battle for female emancipation. For Snaith, on the contrary, both the poetry and the prose of Sarojini are the result of a political struggle in the nationalist sense, while for Betsy George (2016), Naidu has used poetry, like his oratory, to convey her message of denunciation against practices such as *purdah* or *sati*: therefore, poetic production cannot be considered a "weakness".

In this essay, however, I have set out to show that the work of Sarojini, as Snaith and George claim, has no discontinuity: poetry and prose, in a postcolonial perspective, are both the result of an attempt by a subordinate subject, Sarojini, to find a balance between female emancipation, liberation of the Indian nation and preservation of Indian identity. This attempt, however, succeeds only partially in its original objectives, unfortunately sacrificing on the side of female emancipation. The independence of India and the emancipation of women certainly have a link, but they are not interconnected: although one accompanies the other, the real battle that Sarojini seems to want to lead is the emancipation of India from the influence of the Western model. The need to find a different way from Western feminism undermines the result of the battle of Indian women, which therefore remains tethered by the bonds of tradition: while involved in the struggle for independence, they play a specific role, namely of sacrifice for the country – as Sarojini asserts in one of her speeches: "Remember that in all national crises, it is the man who goes out, but it is the woman's hope and woman's prayer that nerves him – nerves his arm to become a successful soldier" (Sengupta 1966: 153).

And yet, not even Sarojini is free from the bond of tradition, given her poems that respond to the taste of the exotic for the Western public. As we have seen, there is no discontinuity between her poetic work and her political prose, as it is the result of a writing that unflinchingly, and unknowingly, is influenced by Sarojini's status of subaltern – whose charm is often observed in her letters to her "godfather" Gosse. If in the second part of her life she criticizes Western world, Sarojini's wings are clipped by Indian tradition. The nationalist spirit that links Sarojini to the Gandhian struggle for independence, and which actually makes her a national poet, will influence her political approach to the issue of women's rights. Probably she would be more revolutionary in recognizing herself as a women's poet, not as a national poet. Her poetry is about women, from a woman's perspective, opening the private space of the *zenana* to the public – and this is more revolutionary than any of her speeches.

Asserting this, I do not want to diminish the fundamental role that Sarojini played in participating in the front line of the political struggle in those years: nevertheless, her experience remains valid more as a symbol and as a model on the practical side, than as a thinker. Through her example Sarojini embodies the advancement of the woman in Indian public life – even if with the limits of her exceptionality, because, even in her subalternity, Sarojini does not belong to the ranks of the lower strata. High caste, educated woman according to the Western model, frequenting the most illustrious families of India, first of all the Nerhu family, Sarojini is a privileged

woman. For the lower caste – out of caste women of rural villages, Sarojini's example is still difficult to reach.

In conclusion, we should not limit our interpretation of Sarojini's poetry with a Westernized feminist paradigm, because in this case we have to admit that her poetry and oratory do not discuss patriarchal power. On the contrary, it is interesting to analyse her verses and prose in a post-colonial and subaltern perspective, as they reproduce the contradictions of her age and the challenges of a subaltern's voice.

I know I am nothing but a dreamer of dreams [...] but this too I know: great dreams are the essential seed of great deeds (Letter to Gopal Krishna Gokhale, 9 January 1909).

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