

A POETIC TRIBUTE TO GANDHI: REFLECTIONS OF PRE INDEPENDENCE INDIAN WOMEN POETS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The corpus of Indian women literature not only reflects the ideas and notions of women psyche but also displays women's history. In general, the poets' writings deal with the themes of their sensibility which is exposed to the existential predicaments of the society. They voice out their personal, social and sometimes even psychological expositions through their works. Hence the reading of women's writing brings a new approach to women's literary scenario, registering their social as well as literary history. Geraldine Forbs in her introduction to her book "Women in Modern India", (2) rightly projects the approach of colonial history that narrating the 'Civilizing Mission' of British to rescue Indian women from their own socio cultural background. In this back drop the present paper unravels how the Indian women poets of twentieth century, especially during pre-independence period, were subjected to their themes and made attempts to their literary articulation.

Keywords:- Indian women, Gandhi, Gandhian Literature

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The corpus of Indian women literature not only reflects the ideas and notions of women psyche but also displays women's history. In general, the poets' writings deal with the themes of their sensibility which is exposed to the existential predicaments of the society. They voice out their personal, social and sometimes even psychological expositions through their works. Hence the reading of women's writing brings a new approach to women's literary scenario, registering their social as well as literary history. Geraldine Forbs in her introduction to her book "Women in Modern India", (2) rightly projects the approach of colonial history that narrating the 'Civilizing Mission' of British to rescue Indian women from their own socio cultural background. In this back drop the present paper unravels how the Indian women poets of twentieth century, especially during pre-independence period, were subjected to their themes and made attempts to their literary articulation.

It is an interesting aspect to observe that many Indian women poets both at pan India and at regional level paid their poetic tribute to Mahatma Gandhi as his ideals influenced the social status of women in India. He also contributed a lot in promoting women education in India as he had envisaged the future of the country through means of their education. The image of Gandhi and his ways were seen as major themes in many of women poets in the form of poems, elegies and commemorative Verses. The impact of Gandhi on women, all over India, marked unforgettable movements which occupy a foremost place in the Indian history as well as the world's. In the "preface" to her book, *Role of Women in Freedom Struggle in Andhra Pradesh*, K.Janaki articulates,

Indian Freedom Movement ... had many remarkable features.. One of the most outstanding was the fact that it involved the women of India in a manner unprecedented anywhere in the world.(v)

In English Sarojini Naidu and Bharati Devi Sarabhai and many a women poets of Telugu wrote poems based on the themes 'Mother India', 'Patriotism', Freedom Movement and about 'taking thread from spinning wheel' etc. Sarojini Naidu and Bharati Devi Sarabhai are the poets who had highlighted 'Gandhism' in their works. In this regard the poet Bharati Sarabhai can be compared to the most popular Indian English Writers like

Mulkraj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan in propagating 'Gandhian views' in a very popular way through her verse play "The Well of the People". Bharati Sarabhai's hands-on experience in serving people, while she was working as volunteer in Mahatma Gandhi's Sabarmathi Asram, helped her in writing this play. She, being a volunteer, even actively participated in serving the sick people, under Nehru's leadership in Kumbhamela took place during those days. This experience made poet Sarabhai to write and incorporate Gandhian vision in her writings. Her literary contribution "*The Well of the People*," was the outcome of such attribution. This play displays the socio-economic conditions of the then society. The ghastly picture of peasants during Kumbhamela was perfectly captured by her poetic spirit and the concept of Indian reality thus represented in the play. The poet suggests that the 'Gandhian way' is the only remedy to the evil results in the field of their social life, their relationship and to their innocence.

"We said, pilgrim, pilgrim of this late time,

Drink, drink from dreaming soul of rebel Gandhi"(page-29)

"The Well of the people" was a true 'Gandhian' play in its true sense. The images used in this verse play, – the usage of charaka (the spinning wheel) propagates the Gandhian ideal, was meant for serving the poor while giving due importance (prevailing) to the existence of life and its associated struggle rather than pilgrimages.

Sarojini Naidu was another writer who touched the same theme and contributed to 'Gandhian Literature'. In fact her social life and her speeches on freedom movement, articulated more about her patriotism than her poems. But whatever little she had written were the most memorable ones. Her poem 'Lotus' is a symbolic transfiguration of Mahatma Gandhi to 'Lord Buddha', seated on the Lotus flower, with the same agony and compassion for crippled humanity. The others poems which invoke patriotic feel among her readers are '*Awake*', '*An Anthem of Love*', '*To India*, *The Gift of India* and, *Memorial verses-Gokhale*.

'The Lotus' is a poem dedicated to M.K. Gandhi, written in the form of a sonnet. In this poem no where the poet mentions the name of Gandhi, expect using the phrasal image, 'the myriad-petaled grace'. This image in its true sense, was symbolically attributed to Gandhi, and immortalized his character through her poem in the world of literature. In this poem the poet portrays 'Mahatma Gandhi' as a great saviour to common man's suffering and a ray of hope and disentanglement to their lives.

"And hungry winds with wings of hope or hate,

Have thronged and pressed round thy miraculous prime

To devastate thy loveliness, to drain".

To Indians who owe a lot to Gandhi, appears to them as an 'incarnation of Lord Buddha in a sitting posture', seated on the Lotus flower.

In a similar way, in Telugu, poet Uttukuri Lakshmi Kanthamma compares Mahatma Gandhi with a transcendental configuration while addressing him as 'Royal Sage' (Raja

yogi). In her poem 'O! Mahatma', she compares Gandhi with ancient sages and towards the end of the poem she concludes, by elevating him from that ordinary sage's level to even a higher level. The poet in her eagerness and talkativeness compares him with a sage though the sage doesn't possess Gandhi's grandeur and his fame. Gandhi, with his 'Selflessness' and 'truthfulness', could cross the summit of the strong Himalaya's and hence, he was an example for 'mountain of sacrifice'. Here the poet uses 'metaphor's to identify him with the mountain's strength. A sage may lead a simple life like 'Gandhi' but cannot sacrifice his life for the noble cause, for his country's sake. Here through this poem, the poet extrapolates him as "Raja Yogi", he, who, by rejecting all his physical comforts transcends himself to that level of tranquillity.

*"By embodying the love into sacrifice
You relinquished the love and sacrifice
And you became Raja Yogi".*

Another telugu poet, Vinjamuri Venkata Ratnamma wrote a poem titled "Appraisal of Gandhi" (Gandhi Sthuthi), praising him as a genius for his 'preaching of peace'. She compares Gandhi with Lord Krishna. To the poet, with his spinning wheel Gandhi appears as the Lord with his Wheel of weapon on his finger. We observe one more telugu poet, Veluvolu Vasantha, who also wrote poem on Gandhi, titled "Mahatma Gandhi". In this poem she praises Gandhi as the saviour for untouchables by showing them the spinning wheel as remedy to their suffering.

*To these millions of Daridra Narayans
Gloomy with hunger and poverty,
Endured with pain, you endorsed
The 'wheel' as a remedy to their suffering*

In the poem 'Awakening' Tallapragada Viswa sundaramma, a telugu poet, invokes the feelings of eradication of slavery and untouchability as Gandhian concepts. She propagates the greatness of Mahatma Gandhi to her fellow countrymen. The poem gives a powerful articulation on the practice of untouchability prevailed in the then society. When untouchability overshadowed the society by spreading its darkness, Gandhiji's 'call' had brought a 'bright light' to illuminate the darkened or gloomed souls of Indians by his preaching (speeches).

*"Gandhi is our Father and Lord
Gandhi is our teacher and soul
To our nascent Indian country
Was he not the great Prophet?"*

She Compares Gandhi with god and praises him as our lord, our Guru (teacher), and our soul; and he was almost a prophet in designing the future to our new India.

Sarojini Naidu's poem, '*The Gift of India*' portrays how her children (Indians) were working in the war. She portrays the miserable condition of the Indian soldiers working for the war (may be about Indian soldiers fought in the second world war for British Govt.)

*"They lie with pale brows and brave broken hands,
They are strewn like blossoms mown down by chance
On blood brown meadows..."*

The ghastly sight of the war field was articulated through these lines. The poet articulates her demands, like a typical Indian motherly and womanly way, for the justice to be rendered to her dead children and who had to be offered 'memorial thanks'. This demand shows the brave act of a mother, who painfully accepts the 'victorious death' of her children. The similar theme of 'wounded soldiers' is surprisingly seen in Telugu Poet Oleti Nithyakalyannamma's poem 'Swatanthrya Lakshmi'. In this poem the poet describes the women volunteers who took part in the 'Freedom Movement' who were inspired and responded immediately to the call of Gandhi. They were ruthlessly beaten by British police by their lathi, till the volunteers' bodies were torned.

*"Long soft hair was loosened, scattered and
Spread up to knees
The fair tender hands lost their bangles
The whole body oozing blood
By bearing the punishment
Given by the police lathi....."*

The women, being volunteers, were bearing the painful and tortured punishment to attain the freedom for their mother land. This poem reveals the brave deeds of women during the Indian Independence movement. Both Sarojini Naidu and Telugu poet Oleti Nithyakalyannamma had written these poems on the similar grounds including the descriptions they made for beaten soldiers/ volunteers.

When compared to Indian English women poets, it is observed that a large number of women poets at regional level (Telugu) had responded to Independence Movements. Hence one may observe the themes related to Freedom struggle were found more in Telugu Language than in English. During this period the literary magazines and news papers of Telugu were flooded with poems on these themes, inspired millions of people, was the historical fact. In regional language Telugu, poets like Kanuparthi Vara Lakshamma, Utukuri Lakshmi Kanthamma, Gudupudi Indumathi, DesiRaju Bharati, Tallapragada Viswa sundaramma, Burra KamalaDevi, Devulapalli Sathyavathi, Puttaparthi Kanakamma, voleti Nithya Kalyanamma, Samavedula Chiranjeevamma were only a few to name among them.

However in English, Sarojini Naidu and Bharati Sarabhai's names will be included in this regard. Sarojini Naidu's patriotic fervor was largely revealed in her social activities and in her inspiring speeches on the 'Freedom Movement' than in her poetic works. Yet there

were a few poems displaying the need for 'free India'. In the poem *Anthem of Love*, she promises the 'Mother land', that all Indians with "one undivided and indivisible soul", work together with unity to attain the freedom to the country. In Her own words: all Indians are-

*"Bound by one hope, one purpose, one devotion
Towards a great, divinely – destined goal
It is none other than the winning freedom to India."*

The above poem reveals the deep desired urge of all Indians and their dedication for a noble cause. This almost can be considered as a pledge to be redeemed.

In another poem '*To India*', Sarojini Naidu addresses the 'Mother India' to 'rise and regenerate' from deep sleep, for her children's sake, who were suffering from 'fettered darkness weep'. The India which is once 'Empress of the sovereign past' should regain its great awakening. This message radiated not only in the present poem but also through her motivating grand public speeches and inspired thousands of volunteers who are working for the country.

*"Thy future calls thee with a manifold sound
To crescent honours, splendors, victories vast;"*

The poet articulates through the poem as though she is consoling Mother land who was disowned from ages of deep sleep for her children's sake, who were suffering from 'fettered darkness weep'. The India which is once 'Empress of the sovereign past' should regain its 'crownly awakening'. This radiant message is not only endured in the present poem. It was echoed even in her renowned public speeches and inspired thousands of working volunteers.

I A Telugu poet Desi Raju Bharati in her poem "*Deevena losangumamma*", requests the mother land to give blessings to her children who have become soldiers by forming an 'army of peace' (Shanthi Sainyamu) to take part in the country's freedom fight. By the active involvement in burning the foreign clothes, taking part in the civil – disobedience movement, and finally Indians will:

*"Make the world bewilders! And hence bless them that they
will get the victory".*

Spinning Wheel as a theme:

The range of themes varies from poet to poet. But a common theme strikingly observed in both the languages, the English and Telugu was the image of 'Spinning wheel', which was viewed as Gandhi's icon. 'The Spinning wheel or Charka' which is introduced by Mahatma Gandhi, became lively hood for many poor and middle classes. The 'wheel' was used by the poets as a sign of victory and was also observed as a symbol for changing times (*Well of the people*)

*The wheel of the old world is turning,
It has to take full circle*

*Orion there is burning
O who to bring miracle?*

The above lines of Sarabhai reveal the changing social scenario of Indian circumstances. The people are eagerly waiting for their saviour, Gandhi, whom they are expecting to enter as a miracle into their lives. In the following lines she says that the people of India (for the poet, the Indian peasants) had witnessed "Golden-age-old, buried under modern debris". They had bitter experiences of earth quakes, the plague, the flood, the famine but still could save or 'affirmed their homes', because, the poet says the reason that:

"For we climbed the hill through the spinning wheel"- (Sarabhai 28)

To all the sufferers 'the spinning wheel' has become a talisman. Through these lines the writer could give a philosophical touch to the theme by articulating wheel 'as a fortune' rotates and shows the ups and downs of life.

In Telugu too we observe some poets wrote poems on this theme. A poet veluvali venkata lakshmi Narasamamma in her poem '*Appraisal of Gandhi*' compares the *charaka*, the Spinning wheel of Gandhi to the wheel shaped weapon of Lord Srikrishna wearing on his point finger and gets ready for the annihilation of the evil (dushta Sikshana),

Desiraju Bharati, in her poem titled '*The tune of spinning Wheel*' echoes the reverberating tune of the Spinning Wheel and invokes the people to take part in the freedom movement. She wrote this poem in the form of traditional song and wrote in stanzas form. The rhythm of this song reverberates in the minds of the people provoking them joining in the freedom movement. The echoing sound of this spinning wheel may vibrantly resonate in the hearts of the enemies.

*O! You Indian maids, have you heard the echo tune of spinning wheel!
Secures people, their property, their chastity and
Provides comforts always to the whole of mass
.... Have you heard.....!*

Thus we observe a lot many women poets wrote many poems during Indian pre-Independence period. It is visibly observed that in Indian English literature very fewer poets opted the theme "Gandhi and patriotism" when compared with regional Telugu women poets.

To our surprise many of these above referred Telugu poets were the active participants in the Indian freedom movement too. So writing poems on Gandhi and freedom movement, for them, is almost an autobiographical approach. But for Indian English poets, writing in English rather than writing in their Vernacular is a heavy task. Perhaps an educated or an Elite group of women only had the opportunity of writing in English as their familial support prompted them to do so, like the case with Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, is only a defensive attribution. In reality there were very few prominent

Indian English women poets exist during the period of early twentieth century who were considered as minor poets and among them very few have responded and wrote poems on the theme Gandhi. However the present observations on the theme 'Gandhi' give rise to reconstruct the Indian women's history and literary history, occurred during Independence period, from women's perspective and may answer few of subdued questions. Many of these regional poets' works are not available today even in the libraries. The present attempt is almost unearthing of poets forgotten.

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