

**A Comparison of a Structuralist Approach and a Poststructuralist Approach in the Study  
of Sarojini Naidu's Poem 'The Gift of India'**

**By Jyothi K. B, Assistant Professor. Government First Grade College, Gubbi, 572216. Tumkur District,  
Karnataka.**

**Bio-Note**

I am an Assistant Professor in Government First Grade College, Gubbi. I have submitted my Ph D thesis in Tumkur University and waiting for my Viva Voce to complete. I am interested in culture studies, structuralism and semiotics. My Ph D topic is "Circulation of ideologies- A Study of Personal Narratives of Kushwanth Singh, S.L Bhyrappa, Kamala Das and Shobha De"

**Declaration**

I have read and understood and agreed to the terms and conditions and guidelines of the journal.

**Abstract**

One can attain a sense of individual text in terms of larger texts which are acquired through experiences of one's life. Sarojini Naidu's poem 'The Gift of India' expounds the concept of 'Daana/ Gift' in the larger context of Hindu practices and tradition. The article tries to place this particular text of Sarojini Naidu in its larger context of Indian Hindu philosophy and tradition.

**Key Concepts**

Structuralist practices, Post structuralist practices, Concept of Daana/ Gift in Hindu Philosophy, Exploitation of colonies through ideological force, pitfalls and lacunae in the arguments of the poetess.

Structuralist interpretations identify the poem 'The Gift of India' as a poem written in praise and admiration of the courage and sacrifices of 10 lakh Indian soldiers who served the allied during first world war for the western nations. The poem not only concentrates on the sacrifices of soldiers for someone else's war, but also talks about the numerous benefits the foreign countries reaped from India. The imperial powers gave a call to all colonies, including Indians to help them

in the 1<sup>st</sup> world war. India which was a colony of Britain helped the imperial power of Britain with men and materials. Sarojini Naidu calls this as gift of India. Sarojini Naidu personifies mother India in the poem. Mother India exposes her reaction to the act of sending her sons as soldiers to the western armies during the first world war in the poem 'The Gift of India'. The speaker of the poem mother India speaks of the pains she underwent because of the sacrifice of her sons to the western nations.

According to Hindu Philosophy, the principle underlying a ritualistic sacrifice and the gift is essentially same, viz giving up one's ownership over an object willingly and donating it to someone else. In a sacrifice, it is done in fire with respect to a deity, whereas a gift is given to a human being who needs it. A gift is also a sacrifice in the broadest sense. (Swami Harshananda) In the same lines, Sarojini Naidu picturizes the gift of Indian soldiers as a sacrifice.

And the Mahabharatha says that those objects which we like most, which we desire to keep with us, are the fittest to be given away. What is obviously meant here is that one should be prepared to sacrifice even his dearest object for the sake of others. In the same sense India has sacrificed her sons to the western armies. It has brought lot of pain to the mother land India. But once a gift is made by the donor and accepted by the donee is irrevocable. If the person once gives word regarding the gift of an object, he becomes a debtor to that person and the latter may sue him before the king, if the promise is not kept. Mother India says;

'Priceless treasures torn from my breast

And yielded the sons of my stricken womb

To the drum-beats of duty, the sabres of doom"

This sacrifice has led to the loss of 10 lakh Indian soldiers. Huge number of dead bodies of Indian soldiers appear like shells strewn on the Egyptian river banks. They are now sleeping in the graves of alien strange lands like Persia, Egypt, Flanders and France with broken hands. Mother weeps with pain for the death of her sons but at the same time she is proud that her sons are able to achieve victory for their masters. She writes,

“or the pride that thrills thro’ my heart’s despair

And the hope that comforts the anguish of prayer?

And the far sad glorious vision I see

Of the torn red banners of victory?

Mother India does not want her sons sacrifice to be overlooked and bypassed by the imperial powers who took them to war. She beseeches the western powers to be thankful to the invaluable services of her sons. She says

When the terror and tumult of hate shall cease

And life be refashioned on anvils of peace

And your love shall offer memorial thanks

To the comrades who fought in your dauntless ranks.

Sarojini Naidu is looking at sending of soldiers to the western nations from an Indian perspective of daana as explicated in Mahabharatha where Karna gives away his karna kundala and raksha kavacha as daana to seekers even at the cost of staking his life in danger. Similarly, despite the fear of losing her sons, Mother India braves to send her sons to war just to drive home

the point that victory and fame is greater than mere animal existence. According to Hindu philosophy, the doer of gift or the daana stands on a higher plane than the receiver of gifts and doing daana gives the benefits to the doer. Swamy Harshananda writes, “The earliest references to the concept of daana or gift is found in Rig-Veda which says that those who give dakshina attain immortality and increase their life span.” (Swamy Harshananda) In the same line Sarojini Naidu takes pride in the daana of men and materials to the western nations. She feels that India accumulates punya by acts of giving without any expectation from the giver. She looks at the gift/daana of soldiers as swami Vivekananda says, ‘Give everything and look for no return, Give love, but keep out of barter! Do it as worship! (Harshananda)

Shrinkage and compression of the poem to an integrated meaning by finding our parallels, balances, symmetry, patterns, repetitions, reflections, and contrasts in structuralist approach would decrease the canvas of meanings of the poem. In order to enhance the meaning, post structuralist approach would come very handy. Post structuralist tools help us to identify diversity, divergence, deviation, alteration, fluctuation to the unified meaning of the structuralist approaches.

When read from a post structuralist perspective, the meaning of the poem seems to fall into many contradictions, paradoxes, beaks and shifts, conflicts, absences, omissions, linguistic quirks to the above unified meaning explicated by the structuralists to the poem ‘the Gift of India’. Indian philosophy on ‘gift’ is not just explained in the Mahabharatha but Manusmruthi, Bruhadaranyaka Upanishads, Vedas and Bhagavadgeetha also. Sarojini Naidu’s poem ‘The Gift of India’ falls in disunity with the parallel thoughts on ‘gift’ in other philosophical texts of Hinduism other than Mahabharatha.

The first stanza of the poem 'The Gift of India', speaks about the types of gifts India has given to the Western countries in the increasing order of dearness, excessiveness and valuableness. It includes, raiment, grain, gold and more precious than all these materials are the priceless treasure of 'life of her sons' sent as soldiers to the western nations army. This is seen with lot of pain and anguish in India. Mother India says that these gifts are

"Priceless treasures torn from my breast,

And yielded the sons of my stricken womb 'stricken"

These feelings of agony in 'giving gift' contradicts the essential meaning of 'gift' itself in Hindu Dharmashastras. According to Hindu Dharmashastras, "there is a limit set to the quantity that can be given away the donor is forbidden to give more than he can comfortable give. He will be going against the dharma if he brings misery and destitution to his family and other dependents by giving away everything." (Harshananda). Such gifts appear to be not gifts but renunciations, ruin, bankruptcy, relinquishment and abandonment. Then, why should such acts be called 'gift' at all? Mother India weeps at the gift of lives her sons to the western nations.

"Can you measure the grief of the tears I weep

Or compass the woe of the watch I keep?

Gift is a part of wealth which is given at the wish of the giver. It is not a total shedding and sacrifice. Giving away of rice, garment wealth, gold and ultimately lives of her children is not gift but mindless bestowal and dispersion of all spiritual possession. This act stands in paradox to the meaning of the gift. According to Hindu Dharma shastras, Gift is not total shedding and sacrifice.

The poem starts with the tone of admiration to the proud sons of India who have gone to the western nations as a gift in order to fight wars on behalf of them. Then, the tone of the poem shifts to the gloominess, pessimism, sorrow and despair at death of the soldiers in the wars.

They lie with pale brows and brave, broken hands,

They are strewn like blossoms mown down by chance

On the blood-brown meadows of Flanders and France.

Generally, such painful tone leads to the tone of opposition, revolt, revenge and retaliation or avoidance of such situations. Contrary to this, Mother India is proud of the sacrifices made by her sons for the greater good and this pride thrills through her heart's despair. This tone of gloomy and pessimism breaks and shifts suddenly to the honor, pride and glory that would be brought about by the sacrifice of her sons for the cause of western nations.

“Or the pride that thrills thro’ my heart’s despair

And the hope that comforts the anguish of prayer?

And the far sad glorious vision I see

Of the torn red banners of victory?

Victory is bright by the efforts of her children is glorious to Mother India, but also be a sad one for some sacrifices are too great to be replaced by winning. The banners of victory are torn and red for it is bathed in the blood of Indians who sacrificed their lives for the victory of the British Empire. To this priceless gift, Sarojini Naidu pleads for the gratefulness and thankfulness from the western nations.

And your love shall offer memorial

Thanks

To the comrades who fought in your

Dauntless ranks

And you honor the deeds of the

Deathless ones

Remember the blood of my

Martyred sons!

Tone is the author's attitude towards a subject. It is revealed by the choice of particular words towards a particular subject. The words 'pride' 'anguish' in the expressions 'Or the pride that thrills thro' my heart's despair' and 'the hope that comforts the anguish of prayer' in the 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza expresses negative attitude of mother India while 'pride' 'hope' in the same expression expresses positive attitude. Positive attitude overtakes negative attitude in mother India unexpectedly and immediately. This appears unnatural and sudden in a human heart like mother India who is very gentle, humane, revered from the beginning of the poem .

Does this shift of tones throughout the poem engender the meanings of helplessness, plight and predicament of Indians or neutrality of Indians who prefer to do karma without expectations or does this infer fear of Indians going against the imperial powers? Is this bringing forth the meaning an idiocy of Indians in ironical tones? Is the poetess rationalizing the opinions of national leaders who were in favor of sending Indian soldiers to the western armies? Were the national

leaders appeasing the British for the barter of Indian freedom? Gifts should be given without any expectation while Sarojini Naidu in the last stanza of the poem seeks rewards and blessings from the western nation for the gift done by India. This contradicts the essential meaning of the word gift itself. Swamy Vivekananda says- give everything and look for no return, give love, but keep out of barter! Do it as a worship. Finally, as “Yagnavalkya eulogizes gifts given without publicity. The Bible also says “Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth, that thine alms may be in secret.” (Harshananda 228). The intention of writing a poem for publication itself contradicts this basic intention of gift itself.

The first stanza also contains linguistic quirks contradictions. Sarojini Naidu explains the soldier's attendance in the western armies to 'drum-beats of duty' and in the next word, she calls this duty as 'the sabres of doom'. The compulsion of duty and the catastrophe associated with it are paradoxical. Attendance to duty would fetch happiness and contentment to any human being but attendance to the duty of a soldier under the imperial nation would lead to destruction. There would be no patriotic spirit to boost your confidence and philanthropic favoritism to a colonial soldier.

The application of post structuralist approach to the poem, 'The Gift of India' deviates and fluctuates from the essential meanings brought about by the application of structuralist approach. Structuralist approach summarizes the semantic meaning of the poem as a celebration of the success of the Indian soldiers as gifts to western nations while the post structuralist approach argues that the offer of soldiers to western nations is not at all 'gift', but forced renunciation and sacrifice through ideological force. Frequent breaks and shift in emotional tones of mother India within the poem prove that Sarojini Naidu is rationalizing the 'Gift' of soldiers to the west with unstable incoherent arguments and conclusions. These conflicts, contradictions, linguistic quirks,

breaks in tone of the poem points out that whatever acts India did during British times were not unforced and voluntary. Uncomplainingly, post structuralist approach to Sarojini Naidu's poem 'The Gift of India' has expanded and increased the levels comprehension of the readers on British India.

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