



IDEALISM vs. REALISM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TORU DUTT, SAROJINI NAIDU AND KAMALA DAS

Umesh Chandra Mahapatra

Lect. in English, Panchayat College, Bargarh, Odisha

Comparative assessment of writers is very crucial in literature as it helps us understand not only the writers concerned better in relation to each other but also the socio-cultural ambience their works are written in. Comparison always necessitates exploration of Similarities and differences in course of which we encounter complex socio-historical and socio-cultural realities that form and influence the creative consciousness of the writers in question.

Indian poetry in English, although approximately a one hundred and fifty years old phenomenon, has encountered different phases in its course of progression. Indian poets writing in English no doubt share the common Indian way of looking at the world but at the same time they may belong to different periods of history. Hence, we are bound to discover as much differences as similarities in comparative studies of writers belonging to different time periods of history.

Toru Dutt (1856-1877), who belonged to pre-independent India, had a short but remarkable career as a poet. She did not live long enough to see the drastic changes that emerged in the nation in the latter half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. However, it must be borne in mind that Indian English poetry started with her.

Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), belongs to a very crucial phase of Indian history. Her active literary career belongs to the early three decades of the 20th Century. It was a time which was marked by upheaval and destabilization as India was marching ahead to Independence through organised protests. It was a period of transition and Sarojini was not simply a mute witness to the changes brought about by the political happenings. She actively participated in the very process of transition. She lived for seventy years and she dedicated a major part of her life to the Indian Freedom struggle. The involvement in active politics probably brought her otherwise promising literary career to an abrupt end. Many of her poems are eloquent testimonies to the social, political and cultural transition consequent upon the Indian War of Independence.

Kamala Das (1934-2009) was a fire-brand of Independent India. Her poetry spoke volumes about equality and freedom. It is interesting to note here that she wrote almost half a century after Sarojini's career as a poet came to a close.

With this historical background in mind, the present paper ventures to examine the writings of the three writers. It intends to comprehend the factors that led to the formation of their respective poetic selves. Put in another way, the paper would be a scrutiny of the socio-historical contexts of the poets in question as reflected in their literary output. As far as the aspects of comparison are concerned, the paper within its limited scope, cannot afford to discuss all. Hence, it confines itself only to one aspect, i.e, idealism vs realism as reflected in their writings.

The common element among Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das is that all are women writing at different periods of Indian history. Being Indian, they share common Indian's. There is not much of a difference between Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu so far as their socio-historical contexts are concerned. Differences between them do exist but they are not as remarkable as when compared to that of Kamala Das.

Although there exists a gap of almost four decades between the active literary career of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, they seem almost contemporaries in their literary outlook. A study of the two poets in comparative perspective leads us to the discovery of more similarities than differences between them. Both of them subscribe to lofty idealism in their poetry, which bears echoes of Sanskrit and Persian poetic traditions. They are equally indebted to the other past poetic traditions of the land. Kamala Das who was a daughter of Independent India, breathes the very spirit of freedom in her poetry. She does not believe in idealism of any kind, be it religious or social. She is very straight forward in her expressions. Hence, the lofty idealism of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu and the stark realism of Kamala Das stand in sharp contrast to each other. The said difference in attitude can be illustrated through solid instances from their writings.

Toru Dutt had a great fascination for the ancient culture of India. She very strongly endorses Indian mythological beliefs in her poems. 'The Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan', which is the only collection containing her original works, categorically illustrate her unshakable faith in a noble human life. The central characters of most of her poems are mythological personalities who can be termed as cultural icons of India. She is almost utopian in her outlook as a poet. We can have a glimpse of her towering idealism in 'The Legend of Dhruva':



That man is truly wise
Who is content with what he has and seeks
Nothing beyond, but in whatever sphere
Lowly or great, God placed him, works in faith.....
X X X X
Collect a large sum of virtues, thence
A goodly harvest must to thee arise.
Be meek, devout, and friendly, full of love,
Intent to do good to the human race
And to all creatures sentient made of God;
And oh' be humble, for on modest worth
Descends prosperity, even as water flows
Down to low grounds. (<http://www.poetrycat.com>)

This is how Sunitee advises her son Dhruva. She, in fact, tries to console her son who is hurt by the cruel words of his stop-mother Suruchee. The emphasis on humanity, conscience and philanthropy etc. in the above-mentioned lines clearly reflects Toru Dutt's ideal bent of mind.

Toru Dutt, faith in a life which is beyond the present one and which is a nobler one can be observed in the poem 'Savitri'. This is how Savitri persuades yama, the Lord of Death to bring her dead husband Satyavan back to life:

The favours man accords to men
Are never fruitless, from them rise
A thousand acts beyond our ken
That float like incense to the skies;
For benefits can never efface,
They multiply and widely spread,
And another follows on their trace. (<http://www.poetrycat.com>)

There are instances galore also in other poems of her such as 'Butto', 'Laksman' etc that establish her as a lofty idealist.

Portrayal of an ideal human life is a very strong feature in the poetry of Sarojini Naidu too. Sarojini, like Toru Dutt, reposes absolute faith in the possibility of a highly noble human life. She delineates an ideal world in the poem 'Guerdon', which is almost utopian in nature. The poem dreams of making birds, animals and human beings available what is absolutely dear to their heart and mind. A few lines of the poem can be quoted here:

X X
To priests and to prophets
The joy of their creeds,
To kings and their cohorts
The glory of deeds;
And peace to the vanquished
And hope to the strong.....
For me O' My Master,
The rapture of Song! (Chida 23)

Another instance of her towering optimism in achieving the noblest end of human life is found in the poem (To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus):

The end, elusive and afar,
Still lures us with the beckoning flight,
And all our mortal moments are
A session of the Infinite ... (Chida 21)

We can see in these lines the poet's commitment to rise beyond the realities of life. These lines record a movement from transience to permanence which is the ultimate ideal of human life.



Sarojini Naidu, like Toru Dutt, believes that the ordinary human life can be elevated to the noblest extent possible. Therefore she celebrates noble human traits like love, mutuality, cooperation, unity, brotherhood and humility etc. to effect this elevation. She glorifies humility as a precious trait of human life in the poem 'The Victor'.

They filled his courts with gift of price,
With tears of grain and tokens of spice,
Tall jars of golden oil and wine
And herds of camel and kine.....
I had no offerings that was meet,
And laid my life before his feet. (Bandopadhyaya II)

People greet the victor with riches in the poem. But the poet expresses her gratitude to him through sincere human feelings. She humbly bows her head before his feet and offers her very life to him. Placing humanity above the worldly achievements is what she intends to convey in the poem. This is a very powerful instance of her idealism. Her idealization of the brother-sister bond in 'Raksa Bandhan' and emphasis on ideal human traits such as give and take, unity in diversity, love for one's work etc in poems on Indian communities like 'Coromandel Fishers', 'Indian Weavers', 'Indian Dancers', 'The wandering Singers', 'The Snake Charmer' etc. clearly reflect her ideal bent of mind.

Kamala Das, who prefers calling a spade a spade, differs considerably from her two predecessors. Her stark realism stands in sharp contrast to their towering idealism. In contrast to Toru Dutt, who idealizes the national past, Kamala Das is always inclined to concentrate on the immediate reality. Similarly, unlike Sarojini Naidu, who excels in the portrayal of collective existence, Kamala Das is keen on the celebration of individuality. This is how she glorifies the individual self in the poem 'An Introduction':

I don't know politics but I know the names
Of those in power, and can repeat them like
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru.
I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one,
Don't write in English, they said, English is
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone.
It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest.
It is as human as I am human. (<http://www.poemhunter.com>)

Very direct and outspoken in tone, the poem reveals the poet's earnestness to accept life with all its perfections and imperfections. Her comparison of the individual human self to the forest fire is worth mentioning in this context. She writes in the poem 'Forest Fire':

But in me
The sights and smells and sounds shall thrive and
Go on
And on and on. In me shall sleep the baby
That sat in proms and sleep and wake and smile its
Toothless smile. In me shall walk the lovers hand
In hand and in me, where else, the old shall sit
And feel the touch of the sun. In me the street-lamps
Shall glimmer, the cabaret girls cavort, the
Wedding drums resound, the eunuchs swirl
Coloured skirts
And sing sad songs of love, the wounded moan. (<http://www.poemhunter.com>)

These powerful lines depict the individual self in a very positive light. Just like the wild fire which grows brighter by consuming each thing that comes its way, the human self keeps on shining brighter with each joy and suffering that it



experiences. The eagerness to embrace the human self with all its imperfections is a recurrent phenomenon in her poetry. The ideal world of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu with all its nobilities does not appeal to Kamala Das at all. Thus, the comparative study helps us not only to observe the specialities of the three poets in question in relation to one another, but also to understand the development of Indo-Anglian poetry in three different phases of history.

Works Consulted

1. Bandopadhyaya, Pranab. (Ed.). *Women Poets of India*. Calcutta: Arnab Banerjee For United Writers, 1977.Print.
2. Chida, A.R. *An Anthology of Indo-Anglian Verse*. Hyderabad: The Nest, n.d. Print.
3. Dwivedi, A.N. “Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu: A Comparative Approach”, *Papers on Indian Writing in English: Volume: 1 Poetry*. A.N. Dwivedi Delhi: Amar Prakashan, 1991.Print.
4. Rahman, Anisur. *Expressive Form in the Poetry of Kamala Das*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1981.Print.
5. Saxena, D.C. “The Ambient View: Indianness in the poetry of Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das: A Prolegomena to Unity in Diversity”, *Between Spaces of Silence: Women Creative Writers*. Kamini Dinesh (Ed.). New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1994.Print.
6. Singh, Mina Surjit. *Six Women Poets: A Cross-Cultural Study*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2003.Print.