

# Towards Freedom: A Critical Analysis of Sarojini Naidu's Poem *Coromandel Fishers*

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## Abstract

*This paper takes a unique approach to the profound metaphors of the sea, fish, and fishermen in Sarojini Naidu's poem 'Coromandel Fishers', which she masterfully uses to symbolise the Indian Independence movement. By meticulously dissecting the figurative language interwoven throughout the poem, the researcher unveils the poet's spiritual and philosophical ideals, artfully blended with metaphor and myth. The analysis draws a compelling parallel between the fisherfolk and the art of fishing to the freedom fighters and the broader freedom movement, offering a fresh and thought provoking perspective that will stimulate new insights into India's struggle for independence.*

**Keywords:** Coromandel Fishers, Sarojini Naidu, India, Freedom Movement

## Introduction

Sarojini Naidu, a luminary in the realm of Indian poetry, was not just a poet but a beacon of patriotism. Her work, resonating with the musical quality of her poems, earned her the sobriquet 'Nightingale of India' by Mahatma Gandhi. Recognised as 'Bharat Kokila' (cuckoo) by Rabindranath Tagore, she began her poetic journey at the tender age of twelve, penning verses on children, nature, nation, love, and death. Her significance, however, transcends the realm of poetry. Naidu was a pivotal figure in India's freedom movement, a staunch follower of Gandhiji, and a vocal advocate for civil rights, women's emancipation, and anti-imperialistic ideas. Her unwavering dedication and significant contribution to the cause of India's independence, set against the backdrop of a tumultuous colonial era, are truly inspiring and deserving of our utmost respect.

## Literature Review

Research on Sarojini Naidu and her poetry has revealed how she employs imagery to express emotions and thoughts. Christin Hoene explores the symbolism in Naidu's poetry with reference to Arthur Symons' theory and uses the rasa theory of Sanskrit poetics in her analysis of Naidu's poetry. She observes the following, citing specific examples from Naidu's works:

*The senses play a crucial role in the poetry of Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949), both on the level of theme and on the level of aesthetics. ... Naidu creates multi-sensorial sense escapes that evoke the Indian aesthetic principle of rasa, which literally translates into English as 'juice, essence, or taste' and which, in the context of aesthetic theory, denotes the emotive essence of and response to a piece of art. The early twentieth century saw a revival of classical Indian aesthetics, including rasa. Translating this ancient Indian aesthetic principle into modern poetry in English, Naidu harks back to a pre-colonial cultural idea (l) in order to form a national identity that is independent of the coloniser's political and cultural imperialism. (966)*

Hoene's analysis of Naidu's ability to translate the senses into her poetry is critical and theoretically based. It employs the Western ideals of symbolism and the Indian rasa theory, the juxtaposition of the two offering a nuanced understanding of Sarojini Naidu's poetry.

Hoene's analysis of Naidu's symbolism continues the analysis of the postcolonial studies scholar Sheshalatha Reddy: 'Reddy traces Naidu's language of sense perception to both Orientalism and Symbolism. She argues that we can read Naidu's aesthetics at least partly as a response to the English Symbolist movement, with which Naidu was marginally associated via Symons and the Rhymer's Club'. Further, Reddy considers Naidu a 'cosmopolitan nationalist' (571).

(Fatma et al.) have observed that 'almost every aspect of people's livelihood was represented by Sarojini Naidu in her sonnet. The theme of the people seeps into her poetry, and she has successfully succeeded in describing the beliefs, customs, traditions, shibboleth, holidays, happiness and sorrows of people's lives' (9).

Naidu presents the various folk traditions of India in her poetry. The central themes of her poetry include nature, love, life and death, folk life, patriotism, and mysticism (Khanna: "The Poetry of Sarojini Naidu: A Canvas of Vibrant Pageantry of Folk Traditions"). Further, Khanna explores the fusion of the English language with Indian culture in the poetry of Sarojini Naidu (Khanna: "The Poetry of Sarojini Naidu: A Fusion of English Language and Indian Culture"). Pankaj Kumar offers a detailed analysis of the themes of love, life and death in Naidu's poetry. (Pandit) discusses the treatment of nature in Naidu's poetry. He notes that Naidu 'depicts the harshness and cruelty that she saw around her' and that she 'loves Indian traditions and customs' (31). (Chouhan: "Sarojini Naidu: Treatment of Nature") writes that Naidu's poetry is 'not concerned with deep and philosophical questions of God, Man and Universe' (12). (Misra) highlights how Naidu puts forth the themes mentioned above in a lyrical, musical rhythm: 'Most of her poetry constitutes songs and the song impulse, even those poems that are not lyrical. She has written a few ballads and narrative poems filled with her particular mood and emotion' (58).

Besides poetry, Sarojini Naidu's oratory skills are noteworthy. Ummekulsoom Shekhani studies Naidu's oratory as follows:

*Sarojini Naidu's platform rhetoric suggests that she functioned as the representative for Indian women due to her presence in the public sphere as first a poet, and then a nationalist leader. Naidu used her role as a jingoistic orator to persuade her audiences to believe that female equality was a necessary precursor to the independence of India. In her speeches, she reasoned with her listeners using the ancient Indian method of Nyaya and other various rhetorical techniques to strengthen her arguments.* (139)

Adding to the argument, Madisyn Staggs notes on the oratorical abilities of Naidu besides her poetic prowess:

*In addition to Naidu's poetic journey, her social and oratory skills hold merit, most notably her ability to connect with crowds and motivate people to action. Being a poet first, her arguments were not always spoken with pure clarity and freed from excess flowery details, but they always flowed with eloquence and her humor and resourceful nature kept the audience attentive despite the occasional obscurity of her speeches. Naidu's rhythmic voice, paired with her charisma, captivated her audience and drew them in masses from all over the globe to hear her truth.* (67)

Thus, it is evident that Naidu's speech and writing are persuasive as they call her audience and readers to action, especially for the cause of India's freedom. Further, Sarojini Naidu is considered a representative of women's leadership (van Der Spuy and Clowes). Seema Rani has observed the expressions of patriotism and nationalism in Naidu's poetry. Dwivedi analyses to what extent Sarojini Naidu served as a bridge between colonial and Independent India through her speeches, writings, and poetry. Lokuge opines that Naidu is 'an astute dialogist who strategically and expediently manipulated her way through the colonizer's sometimes myopic ways of seeing' (115).

Naidu was a social reformer of a kind. She advocated the education of women. As Roshani Rai notes,

*Sarojini Naidu addressed the Indian Social Conference in 1906 in Calcutta where she spoke on the subject of 'The Education of Indian Women. According to Sarojini the whole movement of striving for a common national ideal should be centred round the 'women*

*question.’ But she regretted that: ‘there is not even an unanimous acceptance of the fact that education of women is an essential factor in the process of nation building’ (144).*

Thus, Naidu was a leading face in the early feminist movement in India.

Manjhi notes, ‘Sarojini’s verse presents the admired and romanticized image of Indian life. It is frequently beautiful, secretive and at times verging on unclarity’ (631). Naidu provides lively descriptions of various modes of life in India. She presents people from all sections of the society in her poetry. (Chouhan: “Indian Sensibility in Sarojini Naidu’s Poetry”) mentions these myriad aspects of Indian life in the form of bangle sellers, palanquin bearers, snake charmers, beggars, wandering singers, gypsies, corn-grinders, etc. (33-34).

### Analysis

The poem ‘Coromandel Fishers’ resonates with the spirit of modern India in the format of an address to a group of fishermen, who, by extension, refer to the whole Indian population enslaved by British imperialism. The poem’s relevance to modern independent India is profound, as it reminds us that true freedom is when we reach a state where we are not divided and discriminated by various things like caste and creed. This poem can be juxtaposed with Rabindranath Tagore’s equally powerful poem ‘Where the Mind is Without Fear’, where he articulates his vision of true freedom - a state where all people can be courageous without fearing anything, where knowledge is accessible to everyone, where divisions are broken down, and people become one and live in harmony with everyone embracing the diversities with love. This thematic connection between the two poems, both written during the Indian independence movement, offers a deeper understanding of the shared ideals and aspirations of the Indian freedom movement.

The Coromandel Coast is the southeastern coastal region of the Indian subcontinent, bounded by the Utkal Plains to the north, the Bay of Bengal to the east, the Cauvery Delta to the south, and the Eastern Ghats to the west. Coromandel fishers are the fishermen who fish in the Coromandel Coast. She vividly portrays the rigid lifestyle and struggles of the fishermen and their meagre earnings. The

poet describes nature artfully with the natural elements near the sea, such as boats, nets, fishes, birds, waters, waves, coconut trees, the horizon, the rising sun, and the moon. Naidu also uses a lot of figures of speech to give a picturesque description of nature, including metaphor, simile, alliteration, personification, repetition, etc. These literary devices serve as powerful metaphors for the socio-political status of the freedom struggle, offering a nuanced understanding of the poet’s message. Sarojini Naidu uses this poem to take a call to awaken the people of India to fight for their rights against the British. The poet urges the people to hasten their freedom struggle.

The first stanza is a call to action in which the poet urges the fishermen to wake early to set forth to work. She addresses them as ‘brothers’, which shows her close affinity with the fishers. The opening line is like the famous quote by Swami Vivekananda: ‘Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached’. Personification is what follows. The skies and the wind are represented as living beings. The poet says that the skies pray to the light; the wind, like a child, lies crying in the arms of the dawn, its mother. There is a sense of longing and yearning for a desperate desire mentioned in these two lines. This is how Sarojini Naidu foreshadows her deepest desire for freedom. She then, like a leader, encourages the fisher folk to work; the word ‘come’ gives an added emphasis. The gathering of the nets and the setting free of catamarans symbolise the various tactics involved in the fight for freedom against the British. The nets and boats can be viewed as the ideologies of the Salt Satyagraha, Quit India Movement, etc. The purpose of the struggle is to regain the lost inheritance ‘the leaping wealth of the tide’. Literally, ‘wealth’ stands for fish. Still, metaphorically, ‘wealth’ stands for the mineral resources and manual labour that the British exploited from India and the traditional values that they robbed out of India in the process of imposing Christianity and westernising and modernising the country. The poet proudly asserts her and her fellow men’s identity as ‘the kings of the sea’. She is sure that the sea – that is, the country India – belongs to them and that they are the rightful heirs to the throne of India, which at present is usurped by the British. The word ‘capture’ is noteworthy, as it connotes the

capturing of nations instead of the 'catching' of fish. Assonance is employed throughout the stanza, which creates a rhythmic effect, enabling the poem to be an anthem to be sung. The poet's call to action in the poem is a powerful reminder of the collective strength and determination needed to overcome oppression and fight for freedom.

In the second stanza, Sarojini Naidu insists on leaving behind all kinds of lazy attitudes and to quicken the fishermen's work. 'The track of the seagull's call' means the path the fishermen follow to reach a place where abundant fish is available. In other words, they are guided by the seagulls to a place where they can catch more fish. This metaphorically stands for the strategy that the citizens should use to win freedom from the oppressors - to follow the leaders. This strategy brings fish in abundance; metaphorically, it brings the wealth of autonomy and self-governance to one's country. This strategy proved effective, as historically, in 1947, India won her independence from the British imperial government, and in 1950, she set up her constitution and lived through 77 years of independence. Naidu also implies that one should follow nature to gain a good life. Natural phenomena inspired all human inventions; for example, navigation and compass were developed by studying stars. A series of metaphors follow that are encouraging and motivating. The poet views the universe and its elements as part of one family, as is evident in the attribution of the status of mother to the sea, brother to the cloud, and comrades to the waves. The poet also evokes the idea that all nature is on their side to aid them in defeating the enemy forces, the British government, commerce, and the army. No matter the difficulties, the sea god watches and guards the fishers. The sea god is represented as fighting with the storm, personified as a demon with long hair; the sea god has the upper hand as the god holds the demon's hair. Here, Naidu alludes to the Indian mythological beliefs in various gods. The stanza has a hopeful tone in it.

The last stanza contains consonance, as the word 'sweet' is repeated throughout along with words like 'shade', 'scent', 'sands', 'sound', 'voices', 'kiss', 'spray', 'dance', 'foam's', 'sky', and 'sea', causing an alliterative effect. The ideas are arousing in nature, urging the reader/listener to fight for freedom.

Throughout the stanza, the close affinity with nature is reiterated as the poet draws our attention to the sweetness of the natural aspects like 'the shade of the coconut glade', 'the scent of the mango grove', 'the sands at the full o' the moon', 'the sound of the voices we love', etc. These are the soft aspects of nature. But in the fifth line, Naidu asks the reader to go and reach for the wild aspects of nature, like braving the storm and the sea (by extension, the challenging aspects of life like suffering), because only then can the fruits of freedom be relished. Naidu attributes the comparative degree 'sweeter' to describe the superiority of the wild aspects of nature, like 'the kiss of the spray and / the dance of the wild foam's glee'. Chatting under the tree shades is sweet, but getting into the sea is sweeter. The imagery used in this stanza is more potent than the previous stanzas, and it is evocative as it is combined with consonance. In totality, the poem becomes a rhythmic feast. A sense of collectiveness runs throughout the lines as the poet says words like 'our' and 'brothers' and repeats them frequently. The solidarity needed to defeat any opposition is evoked here. The age-old proverb 'United we stand; divided we fall' is relevant here. The poem ends with a note of moving forward as the poet says, 'Row, brothers, row'. It can also be taken in the sense that the readers should march in battle against the enemies; they should go to 'the edge of the verge' to get what they want. The imagery in the line 'where the low sky mates with the sea' brings to our minds the clash of two armies in a battle. However, the word 'mates' is unique because the poet does not say 'meets'. Instead, she says, 'mates'. This means that though there is an inevitable clash ahead, the ultimate end she desires is peace. And Naidu's hope does not fail because today, in 2024, India and Britain are good friends.

### Conclusion

Offering oneself to the higher cause of one's nation's independence is the essence of this poem. When read along with another poem by Sarojini Naidu – a love poem – which goes by the title 'If you call me,' the driving force behind the fight for freedom is well founded and understood. A few lines from the poem are as follows:

*If you call me I will come  
Swifter, O my Love,  
Than a trembling forest deer  
Or a panting dove,  
Swifter than a snake that flies  
To the charmer's thrall...  
Swifter than desire  
Swifter than the lightning's feet...  
If you call me I will come  
Fearless what betide.  
Such is the bliss of freedom.*

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