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## Teaching Sarojini Naidu in the 21st Century: A Pedagogical Perspective

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### Abstract:

In an era defined by rapid socio-political transformations, digital learning, and evolving feminist and postcolonial discourses, the teaching of canonical Indian writers like Sarojini Naidu requires critical re-evaluation. This article, "Teaching Sarojini Naidu in the 21st Century: A Pedagogical Perspective," explores innovative approaches to recontextualizing Naidu's literary and political contributions within contemporary academic frameworks. Often confined to romantic or nationalist readings, Naidu's writings both poetic and political offer fertile ground for interdisciplinary teaching strategies that align with present-day concerns such as gender justice, cultural identity, environmental awareness, and decolonial thinking. The article proposes that Naidu's lyrical poetry, political speeches, and activist ethos can be used to foster critical inquiry in literature, history, and gender studies classrooms.

By analyzing selected poems and prose alongside modern critical theories such as postcolonial feminism, ecocriticism, and cultural studies this study outlines how Naidu's texts can be mobilized to challenge hegemonic narratives and inspire student engagement with questions of voice, identity, and resistance. It also reflects on the role of technology in revitalizing her work through digital humanities, multimedia pedagogy, and online archives. Drawing on classroom experiences, curriculum design, and student feedback, the article ultimately advocates for a more dynamic and dialogic pedagogy that honors Naidu's legacy while making her work relevant to a new generation. In doing so, it invites educators to move beyond static textbook portrayals and embrace Sarojini Naidu as a vibrant figure whose life and literature continue to offer meaningful insights into the challenges and possibilities of the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Pedagogy, Indian English literature, postcolonial studies, digital classroom, 21st-century education, nationalism in literature.

### Teaching Sarojini Naidu in the 21st Century: A Pedagogical Perspective

Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949), known as the "Nightingale of India," occupies a pivotal place in Indian literary and political history. As both a prolific poet and a passionate nationalist, Naidu's work exemplifies the convergence of aesthetic brilliance and socio-political activism. Her lyrical compositions and charismatic public presence offered a distinctly Indian yet globally resonant voice during the freedom struggle. As we enter a new century characterized by digitization, global interconnectedness, and the critical reevaluation of historical narratives, teaching Naidu in the 21st century necessitates fresh pedagogical strategies that are inclusive, interdisciplinary, and dialogic. This article aims to explore innovative methods

and theoretical frameworks for effectively introducing Naidu's poetry and political thought into contemporary classrooms, especially in higher education contexts.

### **I. Recontextualizing Naidu: Historical and Literary Significance**

Sarojini Naidu occupies a distinctive place in the canon of Indian English literature, often hailed as the "Nightingale of India" for the lyrical beauty of her poetry. However, a deeper examination of her work reveals that her literary contribution extends far beyond its aesthetic value. Emerging during a time of intense political ferment in colonial India, Naidu's poetry reflects the confluence of personal expression and national aspiration. Her collections *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912), and *The Broken Wing* (1917) are not merely exercises in Romantic lyricism, but rather complex engagements with themes of identity, belonging, resistance, and reform.

Naidu's poetic voice is shaped by her dual inheritance: a deep-rooted familiarity with Indian traditions and a Western education that exposed her to English literary conventions. Her verses, though often structured in the lyrical and sonnet forms inherited from British Romantic and Victorian poets, are replete with images, symbols, and rhythms that are unmistakably Indian. In poems such as "The Bangle Sellers" and "Indian Weavers," she draws upon indigenous occupations, colors, and rituals to present a tapestry of Indian life, while subtly weaving in critiques of gender norms and class hierarchies. As Bruce King astutely observes, "Naidu's poems must be understood in the cultural and nationalistic context of their time" (King 54). These poems, though appearing simple or folkloric, are layered with meanings that speak to the social realities and aspirations of a colonized people.

Naidu's significance also lies in her ability to bridge the personal and the political. Her poems often depict nature, love, loss, and longing, but they also resonate with a quiet resistance to colonial power structures and patriarchal constraints. In this sense, her poetry aligns with what postcolonial theorists identify as "writing back" subverting the colonial gaze by inserting local realities and voices into English literary forms. Furthermore, her embodiment of Indian womanhood as both poet and political leader challenges the Western feminist stereotype of the "voiceless Eastern woman." Through her dual roles as a freedom fighter who shared platforms with Mahatma Gandhi and as a poet who received acclaim from British literary circles Naidu disrupted binaries of East/West, tradition/modernity, and feminine/domineering.

Despite these layered complexities, Naidu's poetry has frequently been marginalized or misread in academic discourse. She is often presented as a poet of ornamental verses, her political activism acknowledged but not integrated into analyses of her literary work. As a result, many syllabi in Indian universities continue to frame her output as minor or merely derivative of British Romanticism. Such a view not only underestimates her originality but also erases the subtlety with which she negotiated cultural hybridity and nationalist sentiment.

Recontextualizing Naidu's work through contemporary theoretical lenses such as postcolonial studies, feminist theory, and cultural nationalism can yield rich insights. A

postcolonial reading, for instance, can highlight how Naidu reclaims English as a tool of resistance, embedding native idioms and rhythms within a colonial language. Feminist approaches can uncover the gendered subtext in her portrayals of Indian womanhood, where roles such as mother, bride, and artisan become metaphors for strength, continuity, and change. Additionally, her evocation of Indian landscapes, festivals, and mythologies becomes a site of cultural assertion in an era of imperial suppression.

Therefore, a renewed critical engagement with Sarojini Naidu's poetry is not merely an act of literary recovery, but a necessary re-positioning of her within the larger narratives of Indian writing in English. Her works deserve to be taught and studied not just for their lyrical charm, but for their historical urgency, cultural complexity, and ideological nuance. By doing so, we acknowledge her as a pioneering figure whose literary imagination was deeply entwined with the dreams and struggles of a nation on the cusp of independence.

## II. Feminist Interventions and Political Activism

Sarojini Naidu's political activism and feminist vision are inseparable from her literary legacy, forming a rich tapestry of resistance, leadership, and cultural redefinition. Her trajectory from a poet of romantic and nationalist verse to a prominent figure in India's anti-colonial movement highlights her profound commitment to both personal and collective emancipation. As the first Indian woman to preside over the Indian National Congress in 1925 and later the first woman to become the Governor of an Indian state (United Provinces, now Uttar Pradesh), Naidu not only broke gendered barriers in a colonial-patriarchal society but also laid the groundwork for a distinctly Indian model of feminist activism.

Naidu's public life was shaped by her belief in the inseparability of political freedom and gender justice. She was deeply involved in the Women's Indian Association (WIA) and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), organizations that pushed for women's education, legal reforms, and suffrage during British rule. Her international presence, such as her speeches at the East African Indian Congress and meetings with British suffragettes, positioned her as a transnational feminist long before the term gained academic traction. She navigated the male-dominated corridors of politics with a rhetorical grace that concealed but did not diminish the radicalism of her message.

Her letters and speeches, such as those compiled in *The Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu* (1918), offer valuable insights into her feminist consciousness. Far from being a separatist or militant feminist, Naidu championed inclusivity, maternal ethics, and nationalist solidarity, seeing Indian women not merely as passive bearers of tradition but as active agents of social transformation. In a 1917 speech advocating women's suffrage, Naidu declared: "We want to emancipate the spirit of womanhood... not to make her unsexed but to allow her full development within her own sphere." This nuanced vision placed her in line with what postcolonial feminist scholars have called "strategic essentialism" the use of traditional roles to subvert and challenge patriarchal norms.

In feminist pedagogies, Sarojini Naidu becomes an ideal subject for exploring the intersectionality of gender, colonialism, nationalism, and literature. Her biography can be

fruitfully juxtaposed with her poetic oeuvre to illustrate how her identity as a woman, nationalist, and intellectual intersects with and informs her creative expression. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita argue in *Women Writing in India*, Naidu represents an early phase of Indian feminism, one that was rooted in cultural assertion, nationalist sentiment, and social reform rather than confrontation alone (Tharu and Lalita 221). Her life challenges the dichotomies often reinforced in colonial narratives between private and public spheres, softness and strength, tradition and progress.

Moreover, Naidu's advocacy extended well beyond elite politics. She fought for the rights of peasants, the abolition of untouchability, and communal harmony. Her insistence on interfaith dialogue and nonviolence mirrors Gandhian principles, but her rhetorical strategy was uniquely her own marked by poetic cadence, sharp wit, and moral persuasion. In her political writings, she repeatedly emphasized the educational upliftment of women, arguing that national freedom was meaningless without social and gender equity. Her insistence on women's representation in political bodies resonates with current debates around affirmative action and gender quotas in Indian and global politics.

In today's feminist classrooms and critical discourses, Naidu's legacy provides a compelling model of intersectional leadership. Her example allows students and scholars to revisit early 20th-century feminism not as a derivative of Western suffrage movements, but as an indigenous and context-sensitive struggle. She embodied the synthesis of cultural pride and progressive politics, refuting the colonial trope that positioned Indian womanhood as backward or voiceless. Instead, through her poetry and public life, she presented an image of the Indian woman as articulate, politically aware, and spiritually empowered.

In an era marked by increasing polarization and ideological rigidity, Naidu's legacy stands as a reminder of the power of dialogue, empathy, and poetic imagination in shaping just societies. Her feminist interventions rooted in the language of care, collaboration, and dignity offer an enduring framework for rethinking activism, leadership, and resistance in both historical and contemporary contexts.

### III. Pedagogical Strategies in the Digital Age

In the 21st-century classroom, pedagogy is increasingly shaped by digital tools and interdisciplinary approaches. Teaching Naidu offers opportunities for both traditional literary analysis and modern digital experimentation. Educators can employ several strategies to make her works more accessible and engaging to contemporary students:

1. **Digital Archiving and Annotation:** Students can be encouraged to digitize and annotate Naidu's poems using tools like Hypothes.is or Scalar. This not only deepens textual understanding but also introduces students to scholarly digital practices.
2. **Comparative and Thematic Modules:** Her works can be read alongside those of Rabindranath Tagore, Kamala Das, and Maya Angelou, focusing on common themes such as freedom, identity, and gender. These comparative readings help students recognize global patterns in literary resistance.

3. **Creative Responses:** Assignments may include rewriting her poems from a contemporary perspective, creating podcasts that discuss her impact, or dramatizing her political speeches for performance. Such creative outputs allow students to engage with the material affectively and intellectually.
4. **Interdisciplinary Integration:** Naidu's poetry and political speeches can be incorporated into history, political science, and gender studies syllabi, demonstrating literature's capacity to illuminate broader social discourses.
5. **Blended Learning:** Incorporating multimedia resources such as documentary clips, archival footage, and online forums can stimulate broader engagement. Students can be invited to contribute to blog posts or digital journals reflecting on Naidu's relevance in the 21st century.

#### IV. Contemporary Relevance and Global Conversations

Naidu's ideals of pluralism, unity, and democratic dialogue are particularly relevant in today's India, where questions of identity, freedom, and dissent continue to be contested. Her vision of an inclusive nation-state, where diversity is celebrated rather than suppressed, can help stimulate meaningful discussions in the classroom about contemporary socio-political challenges.

Further, her work offers an excellent point of entry for global conversations around decolonization, women's leadership, and cultural hybridity. For instance, in global literature courses, Naidu can be paired with figures such as Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, or Malala Yousafzai to analyze the role of women in socio-political transformation across cultures.

In addition, Naidu's poetic negotiation of colonial language and native imagery presents a compelling model of cultural hybridity. She embraces English not as a colonizing force but as a medium for indigenous self-expression and resistance. This aspect resonates with postcolonial theorists like Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who emphasize the strategic use of colonial languages in subverting imperial power.

#### V. Challenges and Considerations

Despite her many contributions, Sarojini Naidu's place in the academic canon remains underexplored. The major challenges in teaching her include:

- The tendency to romanticize her poetry, ignoring its political and subversive undertones.
- Limited availability of critical scholarly material on her compared to her male contemporaries.
- Overlooking her non-poetic writings (speeches, essays, letters) in literary syllabi.

To overcome these, educators must adopt a critical and intersectional approach. Including lesser-known texts, encouraging student-led research projects, and engaging with feminist and postcolonial criticism can revitalize classroom engagement.

### Conclusion

Teaching Sarojini Naidu in the 21st century demands more than a nostalgic revisiting of a canonical figure; it calls for a dynamic, critical, and forward-looking engagement with her multifaceted legacy. Naidu's work situated at the intersections of poetry, politics, gender, and nationalism resonates with many of the most urgent conversations of our time: the struggle for social justice, the articulation of minority voices, the politics of language, and the gendered dynamics of public life. Her poetic voice, often dismissed as overly lyrical or imitative, reveals new depths when examined through contemporary theoretical lenses, including postcolonialism, intersectional feminism, and cultural studies.

In reimagining Naidu's place in the classroom, educators must move beyond surface-level readings and instead foster critical dialogues that connect past and present, text and context. The classroom can become a site for interrogating not only Naidu's literary forms and political affiliations but also the broader structures of literary historiography that have marginalized certain voices while canonizing others. Her poetry can be compared with that of other global female voices like Emily Dickinson, Maya Angelou, or Kamala Das to examine how women across cultures use verse to negotiate identity, power, and resistance.

Moreover, the integration of digital humanities tools, archival resources, visual storytelling, and intermedia projects can make Naidu's work more accessible and relevant to today's learners. Students can be encouraged to explore her letters, speeches, and essays alongside her poems, thus blurring the boundary between literature and political discourse. Such pedagogical strategies invite students to see Naidu not just as a historical figure, but as a living voice within the ongoing narrative of India's literary and socio-political evolution.

Ultimately, engaging with Sarojini Naidu's work in the classroom provides an opportunity to model inclusive, reflective, and socially responsive pedagogy. Her life and literature encourage us to question rigid binaries between East and West, feminine and masculine, poetry and politics and instead embrace complexity, hybridity, and dialogue. In doing so, we honor not only her individual contributions but also the broader tradition of resistance and creativity she represents. Teaching Naidu in our time is an act of both remembrance and renewal a reaffirmation of literature's enduring capacity to inform, inspire, and transform.

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