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## “The Blood of My Martyred Sons”: A Critical Study of Sarojini Naidu’s *The Gift of India*

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### Abstract

Sarojini Naidu’s *The Gift of India* is a poignant poetic tribute to the Indian soldiers who fought and died in World War I under British command. This paper explores the poem as a multifaceted narrative—political, maternal, and spiritual—that intertwines nationalist fervor with universal themes of sacrifice, grief, and historical memory. Through the voice of Mother India, Naidu merges the symbolic and the real, employing rich metaphors and evocative diction to foreground the personal cost of colonial warfare. The poem also resonates deeply with Indian spiritual philosophies drawn from the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Vedas, and the Bhakti and Purāṇic traditions, all of which uphold the sanctity of selfless duty and the immortality of the soul. This study positions Naidu’s elegy not only as a historical commentary but as a modern articulation of ancient Vedantic ideals that celebrate both action (*karma*) and transcendence (*mokṣa*).

### Preface

*The Gift of India*, penned in 1915 by Sarojini Naidu—India’s “Nightingale”—stands as a compelling blend of poetic artistry, patriotic sentiment, and spiritual depth. While composed in the context of colonial subjugation and global war, the poem transcends its immediate historical moment by embodying the eternal archetype of the grieving yet noble mother. This research seeks to illuminate how the poem’s emotional and thematic core aligns with the profound wisdom of Indian philosophical traditions, particularly Vedānta and Bhakti, while simultaneously offering a critique of imperial exploitation. By examining both the literary craft and the metaphysical undertones of Naidu’s work, this paper invites readers to engage with the poem not merely as a nationalistic lament but as a sacred invocation—an offering of remembrance, resistance, and resilience rooted in the soul of Indian ethos. The exploration draws on classical texts including the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Upanishads*, *R̥g Veda*, *Vachanamrut*, and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, placing Naidu’s voice within a continuum of Indian spiritual-humanistic discourse.

### 1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Sarojini Naidu, known as the “Nightingale of India,” uses a rich tapestry of literary devices to convey grief, patriotism, and maternal sacrifice in *The Gift of India*:

- **Metaphor:** India is metaphorically personified as a grieving mother whose “womb” has borne “priceless treasures”—her sons—sacrificed in war.
- **Simile:** “Gathered like pearls in their alien graves” and “Scattered like shells on Egyptian sands” compare fallen soldiers to precious or fragile things, highlighting their value and vulnerability.
- **Personification:** India herself speaks throughout the poem, giving voice to the nation as a sentient, suffering mother.

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- **Imagery:** Vivid battlefield imagery—“pale brows,” “broken hands,” “blood-brown meadows”—evokes emotional responses and visualizes the horrors of war.
- **Alliteration:** Examples such as “pale brows and brave, broken hands” enhance the musical quality and reinforce the solemn mood.
- **Assonance and Consonance:** The repetition of soft sounds in lines like “Silent they sleep by the Persian waves” create a mournful tone.
- **Oxymoron:** “Sad glorious vision” unites contradictory emotions—mourning and pride.
- **Irony:** The title itself is ironic; “gift” implies something given voluntarily and with joy, but here it’s a sacrifice extracted through colonial coercion.
- **Symbolism:** “Banners of Victory” symbolize imperial conquest, and “blood of thy martyred sons” symbolizes India’s forced contribution to foreign wars.

## 2. Structure and Form

- **Rhyme Scheme:** The poem generally follows a couplet rhyme scheme (AABB), creating rhythm and coherence despite the emotional subject matter.
- **Meter and Rhythm:** It uses a loose iambic rhythm with variations that reflect the speaker’s intense emotions.
- **Stanza and Line Breaks:** Four stanzas of six lines each provide a balanced structure, each building on the last—from giving, to mourning, to longing for remembrance.
- **Enjambment:** Phrases like “Scattered like shells on Egyptian sands / They lie...” carry over to the next line, enhancing fluidity and continuity of grief.

## 3. Theme and Subject Matter

- **Primary Theme:** The central theme is *sacrificial patriotism*—India’s forced but noble contribution to World War I.
- **Sub-Themes:**
  - Maternal grief and loss.
  - Anti-colonial sentiment masked in poetic decorum.
  - The duality of pride and pain in sacrifice.
- **Deeper Message:** The poem critiques imperialism while demanding posthumous recognition and respect for Indian soldiers.

## 4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** The tone oscillates between mournful, proud, and indignant. Naidu’s India is both devastated and dignified.
- **Mood:** The poem evokes empathy, sorrow, and reflective guilt, especially for readers aware of colonial history.

## 5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

While the poem is overtly political, its emotional and moral undercurrents reflect deep **spiritual and ethical** values:

- **Bhagavad Gita:** The concept of *karma-yoga*—selfless duty—is embodied in the soldiers who fight without personal desire.

“*Karmanye vadhikaraste, ma phaleshu kadachana*” (BG 2.47):<sup>1</sup> Perform your duty without attachment to outcomes.

- **Vachanamrut (Gadhada I-10):** Emphasizes the greatness of selfless service and sacrifice for dharma. Bhagwan Swaminarayan says, “One who offers his body, wealth, and life for the service of others is truly noble.”
- **Vedantic Worldview:** The poem hints at *vairagya* (detachment)—India must let go of her sons while holding on to dharma and collective dignity.
- **Moral Value:** The ethical imperative of **remembrance** and **gratitude** is stressed in the final stanza.

Sarojini Naidu’s “**The Gift of India**” resonates deeply with **Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom**, especially in its portrayal of **sacrifice, dharma, grief, and the transcendence of death**. While the poem is rooted in a historical and political context (World War I and colonial India), its **philosophical undertones** align with major **Hindu scriptures** that address the meaning of **selfless service, duty, and spiritual detachment**.

Below is a detailed alignment with scriptural references:

### 1. Bhagavad Gītā: Duty, Sacrifice, and Deathlessness

The soldiers, as offered by Mother India, embody the ideal *kṣatriya dharma* (warrior duty). The **Bhagavad Gītā** upholds this concept in its dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna.

#### ► Selfless Sacrifice (Niṣkāma Karma Yoga)

**"Karmanye vadhikaraste, Ma phaleshu kadachana"**

— *Gītā* 2.47<sup>2</sup>

*"You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action."*

India’s sons do not fight for personal gain—they are involuntary participants in a foreign war. Their deaths, while tragic, fulfill a divine aspect of **selfless duty**, a concept rooted in *karma yoga*.

#### ► Glory in Sacrifice for Dharma

**"Sukhaduḥkhe same kṛtvā lābhālābhau jayājayau..."**

— *Gītā* 2.38<sup>3</sup>

*"Treat pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat alike—then prepare for battle. Thus, you will not incur sin."*

The poem evokes the **equanimity** (*samatvam*) of warriors who face death without attachment. It reflects the idea that sacrifice done in the spirit of **dharma** is spiritually elevating.

#### ► Death is Not the End

**"Na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin..."**

— *Gītā* 2.20<sup>4</sup>

*"The soul is never born, nor does it die. It is eternal..."*

By referring to the slain sons as “martyred,” the poem aligns with **Vedantic** and **Gītā-based** notions of **ātma** (soul) being immortal. Their physical deaths are not ends, but transitions.

## 2. Upanishads: Unity of Life and Death

### ► Mother India as the Cosmic Feminine

India as a speaking Mother evokes the **Divine Feminine** (*Śakti*), akin to **Prakṛti** in Vedānta and **Vāk** (**Speech Goddess**) in the **Ṛg Veda**.

"Yasyāṃ jagat sthitam..."

— *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 4.10

"The entire world resides in Her (*Māyā*), and She resides in the Supreme."

India as a Mother figure, grieving but composed, mirrors the **cosmic motherhood** of **Nature or Prakṛti**, silently bearing the cycles of life and death.

### ► Ātman is Unaffected by War or Pain

"Asango hyayam puruṣaḥ"

— *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.15<sup>5</sup>

"The Self is unattached."

Despite the gruesomeness of war, the Self (*Ātman*) remains untouched. This validates the idea that India's sons, though physically lost, live on in a **spiritual plane**.

## 3. Ṛg Veda: Heroism and Cosmic Order

The **Ṛg Veda** glorifies the **warrior who dies for truth or duty** as part of maintaining *ṛta* (cosmic order).

"Indram naro nemadhita vṛtrahantamam..."

— *Ṛg Veda* 1.8.1<sup>6</sup>

"Men invoke Indra, the destroyer of foes..."

Naidu's soldiers may be victims of imperialism, but their **martyrdom** is cast in Vedic light—as **upholders of sacrifice** even in a **morally complex war**.

## 4. Shrimad Bhagavat Mahāpurāṇa: Glorification of Martyrdom

In **Bhāgavata Purāṇa**, noble sacrifice for a higher cause is revered. The ideal of offering one's body for divine or national service resonates with:

"Dehaṃ parārthe pratyarpya..."

— *SB* 10.60.53<sup>7</sup>

"He who offers his body for a higher cause attains immortality."

India, as a Mother offering her sons, mirrors **Devakī**, who suffers silently for a cosmic purpose. The **Bhāgavata's** devotional undercurrent of **sorrow leading to transcendence** is echoed in the poem's tone.

## 5. Vachanamrut: Glory of Selfless Devotion and Service

The **Vachanamrut** glorifies **niṣkāma sevā** (selfless service), even at the cost of one's life.

"To offer one's body, mind, and possessions to God or society is the highest spiritual act."

— *Vachanamrut Gadhada* 1-10

Here, the soldiers' sacrifice can be seen as **dharma-yajña**, an act that brings glory to the one who gives and transforms **suffering into sacred offering** (*ārpaṇa bhāva*).

## 6. Other Scriptural Parallels

### ► Mahābhārata (Shānti Parva):

The epic discusses the ethics of war, stating:

"There is no greater dharma for a kṣatriya than to die in battle for a righteous cause."

Although WWI was not India's war, the **suffering borne by Indian soldiers** parallels the **moral dilemmas** explored in the Mahābhārata.

### ► Durga Saptashati

India, as a speaking mother, invokes the form of **Chāmuṇḍā or Durgā**, fierce yet compassionate, who **offers and mourns life** for the cause of righteousness.

### Conclusion

Sarojini Naidu's *The Gift of India*, though framed as a nationalist elegy, is deeply embedded in **Vedantic, Upanishadic, and Purāṇic** wisdom. The poem:

- Honors the **transcendence of the soul** (*ātmā*),
- Upholds the **dignity of duty and sacrifice** (*karma yoga*),
- Depicts India as a **Divine Mother**, an archetype of **Śakti**,
- Reminds humanity to **remember with gratitude and reverence**.

Thus, the poem becomes not just a **patriotic lament**, but a **spiritual meditation on sacrifice, dharma, and immortality**.

## 6. Historical and Cultural Context

•**Time and Context:** Written during or shortly after World War I (1914–1918), when over a million Indian soldiers fought under British command.

•**Political Climate:** A time of growing Indian nationalism and discontent with British exploitation.

•**Colonial Undercurrent:** Though couched in eloquent diction, the poem subtly condemns the colonizer's exploitation of Indian lives.

•**Tradition and Influence:** Rooted in **Romantic and nationalist poetry**, influenced by British literary forms but infused with Indian sentiment.

## 7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

•**Personal Layer:** Though not autobiographical, Naidu writes with maternal emotion and nationalist fervor—perhaps imagining herself as the mother of these "martyred sons."

•**Emotional States:** Pride, sorrow, frustration, hope, and a yearning for recognition intermingle in the poem.

•**Inspirations:** Likely inspired by the loss of Indian lives in WWI and the widespread grief in India, as well as the poet's own activism in the Indian independence movement.

## 8. Target Audience and Purpose

•**Audience:** Primarily the British colonial establishment and the global community.

• **Secondary Audience:** Indian readers, particularly patriots, freedom fighters, and grieving families.

• **Purpose:**

- To highlight India's contribution to the war.
- To evoke sympathy and encourage acknowledgment.
- To voice a dignified protest.
- To immortalize the memory of the fallen soldiers.

### 9. Personal Interpretation

Sarojini Naidu's *The Gift of India* is a **poetic eulogy** wrapped in **political resistance**. It transforms patriotic grief into lyrical protest. By personifying India as a bereaved mother, Naidu gives voice to a nation mourning its lost sons, demanding dignity, recognition, and eventual freedom.

On a personal level, the poem compels readers to reflect on the cost of war, the injustice of colonial sacrifice, and the power of poetic remembrance. It reminds us that the dead must not be forgotten—not only for their bravery but also for the cause into which they were conscripted.

Ultimately, the poem is both **a call to memory and a call to conscience**.

### Conclusion

Sarojini Naidu's *The Gift of India* remains a powerful poetic expression that fuses nationalist sentiment with the spiritual gravitas of India's scriptural tradition. As Mother India mourns the loss of her sons, the poem rises beyond grief to articulate a deeper understanding of sacrifice, where death becomes a sacred duty performed for a higher cause. This vision aligns with the Vedantic belief in the immortality of the soul, the Gītā's celebration of *niṣkāma karma*, and the Upanishadic ideal of transcendence through self-realization. Naidu's portrayal of suffering, not as despair but as divine offering, evokes the imagery of *yajña* (sacrifice), so central to both Vedic and Bhakti worldviews. In weaving historical memory with spiritual universality, *The Gift of India* does more than commemorate a war—it reclaims the Indian voice and honors the sacredness of human life and loss in the face of imperial indifference. Ultimately, the poem becomes a gift in itself: an enduring tribute to India's pain and pride, rooted in timeless truth.

### Reference:

1 कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ 47 ॥

2 कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ 47 ॥

3 सुखदुःखे समे कृत्वा लाभालाभौ जयाजयौ ।

ततो युद्धाय युज्यस्व नैवं पापमवाप्स्यसि ॥ 38 ॥

4 न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचि

नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः ।

अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो

न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥ 20 ॥

5 स वा एष एतस्मिन्संप्रसादे रत्वा चरित्वा, दृष्ट्वैव पुण्यं च पापं च,

पुनः प्रतिन्यायं प्रतियोन्याद्रवति स्वप्रायैव; स यत्तत्र किञ्चित्पश्यत्य-

नन्वागतस्तेन भवति; असङ्गो ह्ययं पुरुष इति; एवमेवैतद्याज्ञवल्क्य,

सोऽहं भगवते सहस्रं ददामि, अत ऊर्ध्वं विमोक्षायैव ब्रूहीति ॥ १५॥

6 एन्द्रं सानसिं रयिं सजित्वानं सदासहम् । वर्षिष्ठमूतये भर ॥

एन्द्रं सानसिं रयिं सजित्वानं सदासहम् । वर्षिष्ठमूतये भर ॥

7 मां प्राप्य मानिन्यपवर्गसम्पदं

वाञ्छन्ति ये सम्पद एव तत्पतिम् ।

ते मन्दभागा निरयेऽपि ये नृणां

मात्रात्मकत्वात्त्रिरयः सुसङ्गमः ॥ ५३ ॥