

Looking through the Lenses of Vakrokti: A Study of Sarojini Naidu's Selected Poems

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Abstract—Sarojini Naidu, popularly known as “the Nightingale of India,” was a poet, orator, visionary politician, and social activist who played notable role in India’s freedom struggle. As a keen observer, Naidu skilfully converted her life experiences into creative and artistic expression, establishing herself as one of the most celebrated figures in Indian English literature. Her poetry reflects lyrical grace, musical qualities, vivid imagery and deep engagement with Indian culture and sensibility. Throughout her long literary career, Naidu gained significant critical attention for her nationalist themes, feminist concerns, romantic expression, and lyrical beauty. However, analysing and interpreting her poetry through the framework of Indian aesthetics provides a novel perspective to uncover deeper layers of meaning and recognize her artistic and aesthetic qualities as a poet.

This present research paper aims to examine Sarojini Naidu’s two poems “Palanquin Bearers” and “The Bazaars of Hyderabad” through the lenses of Vakrokti, a prominent school of Indian poetics advocated by Kuntaka. The Vakrokti school is widely recognized and influential theoretical framework within the tradition of classical Sanskrit literary criticism. The Vakrokti School’s focus on language and stylistic innovation offers a unique viewpoint for understanding and valuing the art of poetry. It is the skill of indirectly expressing ideas in a way that enhances the artistic effect through the interaction of sounds, word choice, and structure. Because it provides insights from the lexical to the compositional level, it is particularly intriguing and helpful for the study of poetry. A greater comprehension of Sarojini Naidu’s chosen poems is made possible by the use of Vakrokti theory, which emphasises how poetic beauty is enhanced by creative departure in sound, imagery, structure, cultural symbolism, and language. In this way, the research provides a critical framework grounded in Indian culture and aesthetics, bridging the gap between contemporary Indian English poetry and ancient Sanskrit literary theory.

Index Terms—Sarojini Naidu, Vakrokti theory, application, critical framework

I. INTRODUCTION

Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) was renowned Indian English poet, a visionary woman far ahead of her time. Apart from her poetic talent, she is also remembered as a freedom fighter, social activist, excellent orator, and political leader whose presence significantly shaped national consciousness. It is seen that Indian cultural variety, traditional values, professions, daily living, and a sense of patriotism are all captured in her work. Naidu was born in Hyderabad into a Bengali Brahmin household and showed exceptional skill at a young age. She was fluent in several languages, including Bengali, Persian, Telugu, Urdu, and English. She received her early schooling in India before moving overseas to further her education, where she was exposed to Western literary traditions and intellectual ideas. She remained connected to her cultural heritage and ideals despite everything. In fact, her writing display current Indian subjects, sensibilities, events, and images despite of the Western influences.

Throughout her writing career, Sarojini Naidu produced a number of notable poems that made her a prominent figure in Indian English literature. Her poetic style and Indian themes were originally shown in her debut book, *The Golden Threshold* (1905). *The Broken Wing* (1917), which exhibits mature expressiveness and deep symbolic content, and *The Bird of Time* (1912), which mirrors intellectual depth and emotional intensity, came next. Through melodic language, her poetry honour Indian life, nature, love, and patriotism. Her literary abilities and creative

development are further revealed in *The Feather of the Dawn* (1961), which was published posthumously.

The Vakrokti School is pathbreaking theory in Sanskrit literary criticism which emphasises oblique expression as the core principle that differentiates poetic language from ordinary speech. As Ganesh Devy appropriately observes, "vakrokti is a theory of poetry which perceives poetry essentially as terms of the language of its expression. It sees the poetic language as the language of metaphor and suggestive communication" (75). It is important to note that the origins of Vakrokti can be traced back to early discussions of poetic language in foundational texts like Bharata's *Natyashastra*. However, it was Kuntaka, a 9th-10th century CE scholar, who gave the Vakrokti theory its most comprehensive treatment in his seminal work, *Vakroktijīvita* (The Essence of Oblique Expression). Kuntaka defines vakrokti as "both words and meanings marked by an artistic turn of speech" (Kapoor 25). It is a remarkable form of language combined with the poet's inventive imagination contributing to its strikingness.

The term "Vakrokti" is derived from two Sanskrit words, "vakra," meaning "oblique" or "indirect," and "ukti," meaning "expression." Together, Vakrokti refers to an "oblique expression," highlighting a departure from straightforward language in order to achieve aesthetic richness and layered poetic meaning. In his book, *The Concept of Vakrokti in Sanskrit Poetics: A Reappraisal*, Hedge tries to define Vakrokti "as the soul of poetry, arguing that the essence of poetic beauty lies in the creative and unconventional use of language. By employing oblique and suggestive speech, a poet can imbue their work with complexity and depth, engaging the reader's imagination and intellect." (22).

By qualifying a poem to offer a novelty in readings, Vakrokti enhances the whole literary experience and increases the reader's interest. It is a basic idea that sets poetry language apart from everyday speech rather than just a decorative stylistic element. The poet uses unique word choice, structural departure, and the harmonic interaction of sound to enhance artistic effect through indirect representation. Therefore, this theory emphasises how language variation is

unavoidable in producing aesthetic and affective effects through diction, syntactic organisation, and phonetic interaction. Vakrokti is therefore more than just adornment on the surface; it is a more profound structural and emotional force in literature. Discussing Vakrokti's six major categories which Kuntaka defines as functioning at various stages of poetry composition is crucial to gaining a thorough grasp of the art form. "It is noteworthy to know that Kuntaka does not leave any aspect related to the art of poetry," says Sachin Singh. He covers everything from the tiniest unit, "sabda," to the full composition, "prabandh vakratā." (107)

Phonetic Obliqueness, also known as Varna-vinyasa Vakrokti, is the imaginative placement of sounds to create a distinctive soundscape. The intentional use of rhyme, assonance, and alliteration may highlight specific feelings or imagery and give the verse a melodic feel. A poem's aesthetic appeal can be increased by using consonant sounds repeatedly to convey a sense of movement or urgency. Pada-purvadha Vakrokti, also known as lexical-level obliqueness, focusses on word choice and arrangement within a line or phrase to provide a feeling of freshness. This includes wordplay, puns, and double meanings. The reader's interaction with the text can be enhanced by the deliberate use of homonyms or words with two meanings, which can offer levels of interpretation. Grammatical-level, or Pada-parardha Vakrokti, is the third main category. The striking and creative use of grammatical features in poetry, such as changes in number, person, voice, tense, and case forms, is referred to as obliqueness. Poets provide expressive originality, artistic appeal, and higher levels of meaning beyond everyday language use through such grammatical manipulation.

Techniques like irony, contradiction, rhetorical questions, and juxtaposition are examples of how Vakya Vakrokti is expressed. By adding layers of meaning, emotional nuance, and artistic beauty to sentences, these methods increase the audience's or reader's level of involvement. The creative way that events or situations are arranged and presented in a literary work is known as Prabandha Vakrokti. The interaction of context, subtext, and narrative structure results in this type of obliqueness, where the arrangement of conversation or situations creates

levels of meaning that go beyond the literal or sequential flow of events. It displays the author's imaginative brilliance in developing the plot to arouse awe, tension, irony, or emotional response. Prabandha-Vakrata or Level of Composition According to Kuntaka's idea of Vakrokti, obliqueness is the highest degree of obliqueness. It deals with the general arrangement and structure of a literary work, showcasing the author's inventiveness in creating a cohesive and beautiful composition. This obliquity stems from the way that different components plot, characters, themes, and artistic devices are skilfully combined to create a coherent and powerful whole.

Palanquin Bearers is highly acclaimed lyrical poem by Sarojini Naidu, consisting of twelve lines, beautifully captures the joy and celebration of a bride's journey to her new home. In its simple structure, the poem is marked by vivid imagery, melodious rhythm, repetition, and simile, which effectively reflects the gentle swaying motion of the palanquin. Commenting on the poem, Dwivedi aptly observed "It is a poem of great artistic beauty and has a rhythmic swing in it which is well in accord with the soft onward movement of the palanquin-bearers." (122)

The first significant feature of the poem that immediately attracts reader's attention is its musical effect and sound pattern. The poet masterfully employs poetic devices such as alliteration, rhythmic flow, repetition, assonance, and consonance which together enhances harmony and poetic beauty which reflects Varna-vinyasa Vakrokti or Phonetic Obliqueness. In fact, Naidu creates traditional folk song like atmosphere through her use of melodious rhythm and repetition which is seen in the opening stanza.

Lightly, O lightly we bear her along,
She sways like a flower in the wind of our song;
She skims like a bird on the foam of a stream,
She floats like a laugh from the lips of a dream.
Gaily, O gaily we glide and we sing,
We bear her along like a pearl on a string.

Alliteration, which gives the poem a melodic impact, should be noted here. The poem has a delicate, flowing cadence that wonderfully captures the palanquin's

gentle swing thanks to the repeated /l/ sound in lines like "Lightly, O lightly" and "we glide and we sing." The same sound conveys lightness, delight, and easy movement in the phrase "laugh from the lips," adding a feeling of warmth and delicacy. The recurrence of the /s/ sound in sentences like "She says," "She skims," "Softly, O softly," and "She springs" is another instance of alliteration. This produces a fluid rhythm that mirrors the palanquin's elegant motion. In "bear her along" and "bird on the foam," the repeated /b/ sound creates a continuous, rhythmic flow, and in "beam on the brow," it conveys a soft gladness.

The poem's gentle and poetic attractiveness is enhanced by Naidu's frequent use of light and nature as inspiration for her images. Similes like "She hangs like a star in the dew of our song," "She skims like a bird on the foam of a stream," and "She sways like a flower in the wind" create soft and striking images. The bride's elegance, purity, and exquisite lightness are highlighted in these pictures, giving the impression that her movements are easy, fluid, and even surreal. The poem's melodic appeal and rhythmic structure are both enhanced by the use of repeated words and phrases. The words such as "Lightly," "Softly," and "Gaily" at the beginning creates rhythmic refrain which captures the joy, tender mood of bridal's journey. Rhyme further enhances the poem's musical quality through end rhymes such as "along/song," "sing/string," and "stream/dream." These rhyming pairs create a smooth, flowing qualities like folk song.

The word used in the title, "palanquin," literally means to a covered litter carried by bearers, used to transport the bride to her new home. At deeper level, it signifies emotional care ceremonial reverence for bride's journey. The poet's conscious choice of this culturally significant word gives it meaning beyond mere physical movement. The usage of the word "bear" indicates lexical obliqueness in the poem. Its simple meaning is "to carry"; however, it also conveys emotional care and responsibility that the bride is carried with a sense of duty, care, and respect rather than mere movement. Similarly, words like "lightly," "softly," and "gaily" refer to the gentle motion of the palanquin in the spirit of celebration and joy. The phrase "pearl on a string" generally means to the careful, balanced movement of the palanquin, but

symbolically it carries ideas of purity, unity, and the bride's precious value within the social environment. The palanquin itself is a powerful symbol, representing tradition, care, and the ceremonial transition of the bride from one phase of life to another.

Softly, O softly we bear her along,
She hangs like a star in the dew of our song;
She springs like a beam on the brow of the tide,
She falls like a tear from the eyes of a bride.
Lightly, O lightly we glide and we sing,
We bear her along like a pearl on a string.

The usage of the pronoun "we" in sentences like "we glide and we sing" and "we bear her along" demonstrates the grammatical-level obliqueness. By emphasising harmony, unity, and coordinated movement, this collective voice turns individual acts into a communal ceremonial experience. Additionally, the present tense conveys a sense of vitality and unbroken movement.

The vibrant and energetic atmosphere of Hyderabad's traditional markets is eloquently depicted in Naidu's *The Bazaars of Hyderabad*. The poem's conversational cadence, which is created through question-and-answer format, transports the reader to the busy market. Naidu conjures forth the sights, sounds, and scents of the marketplace, where merchants showcase an extensive array of items, through luscious and rich visuals. The poem highlights the beauty and vibrancy of Hyderabadi daily life while celebrating the city's cultural diversity, exquisite workmanship, and peaceful fusion of trade and tradition. The poet aims to communicate, as part of the Swadeshi movement, that Indian commodities are genuine, pure, and self-sufficient, and that reliance on imported items is unnecessary.

The poem consists of five stanzas, each containing six lines, and follows a consistent rhyme scheme of abcbeb, creating a rhythmic and harmonious flow throughout the depiction of the bazaar. Moreover, the poem is filled with sensory imagery colors, sounds, and textures that vividly bring the marketplace to life. It provides musical effect though alliteration, repetition, and assonance. For example, phrases like "crimson and curious", "bells for the feet of blue pigeons," and "daggers with handles of jade." The

long "o" sound in words like "gold, sold, boldly" and the repeated "a" sound in "crimson and saffron" produce a smooth, flowing effect.

At the same time, Naidu elevates ordinary market vocabulary into aesthetically rich and suggestive expressions, demonstrating the poem's use of lexical-level obliqueness. The choice of words like "crimson," "silver," "ivory," and "amber" do more than just name colors or materials; they show richness, beauty, and the culture of India. Everyday items like "saffron," "lentil," and "rice" represent food, tradition, and simple life. The phrase "bells for the feet of blue pigeons" gives a feeling of grace and gentle movement. By using such words, Naidu makes the market come alive and adds deeper meaning to simple things, showing the beauty and richness of Indian life.

The question-and-answer format of the poem gives the reader a unique experience. Questions like "What do you sell, O ye merchants?" and "What do you weigh, O ye vendors?" appear often in the beginning of the text. Even though they seem like straightforward questions, they help to emphasise the bazaars' diversity, depth, and cultural relevance. The responses, which describe vibrant products like "saffron and lentil and rice" or "turban of crimson and silver," contrast commonplace items with representations of beauty and custom. Naidu demonstrates Vākyā Vakrokti by using such phrase building to turn everyday market conversation into a poetic, captivating, and significant experience. In order to emphasise the vibrant and energetic imagery of the market, Naidu skilfully combines her lines in the stanza below. This enables the reader to vividly see its colours, noises, and busy movement.

What do you cry, O ye fruitmen?
Citron, pomegranate, and plum.
What do you play, O musicians?
Cithar, sarangi and drum.
what do you chant, O magicians?
Spells for aeons to come.

It is evident that each query is followed with a concise and vivid response that combines flavour, sound, and mystery in a few lines. Examples of these responses include identifying fruits, musical instruments, and

mysterious chanting. This sentence form portrays the bazaar as a lively cultural and artistic place full of life and tradition, rather than merely a place to buy and sell. The market itself represents India's independent economy and cultural cohesion, where many occupations live together. The emphasis on domestic products in the Swadeshi movement also represents pride in local workmanship and opposition to outside influence. Naidu therefore turns the bazaar into a potent emblem of India's cultural, social, and national identity through symbolic items and vocations.

The study of Sarojini Naidu's poetry such as "Palanquin Bearers" and "The Bazaars of Hyderabad" highlights the artistic depth and poetic mastery. Both poems exhibit unique patterns in language, tone, imagery, and meaning despite their disparate settings. The use of Vakrokti theory reveals several levels of interpretation and meaning and demonstrates how oblique expression enhances melody, imagery, and meaning at the phonetic, lexical, grammatical, and sentence levels. By connecting traditional Sanskrit poetics with contemporary Indian English literature, the study shows that Vakrokti provides an important Indian aesthetic framework for comprehending Naidu's poetry.

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